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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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Heading by
MARGARET BRUNDAGE

From the spires of an ancient haunted castle to the subterranean caverns of the Underground winds the sinister trail of a myth-turned-monster!

Iron Mask

By ROBERT BLOCH

"WHERE is she?" demanded Eric Drake, hoarsely. "What have you done with Roselle?"

The tall, bald-headed man shrugged. "Sit down, Eric," he murmured. "There is no need to become excited."

"Tell me where she is," the young man insisted, gray eyes flaring in accusation.

Pierre Charmand met his stare directly. "I have sent Roselle to the Chateau D'Ivers," he answered.

"To the chateau? But you couldn't. Don't you know what they're saying? The Chateau D'Ivers is—"

Pierre Charmand interrupted with a bitter laugh. "I know," he said. "They say the Chateau D'Ivers is haunted. Do you believe it? And do you believe I would send Roselle—my own daughter—to such a place if *I* believed it?"

Eric Drake stared at Pierre Charmand through a veil of candle-light. They were a strange pair, here in the secret quarters of the Underground.

Tall, elderly Pierre Charmand, former Mayor of Dubonne, met the gaze of young Eric Drake, former AP correspondent. A strange pair indeed, and in a strange alliance.

For Pierre Charmand, since the coming of the Nazis to Dubonne, was mayor no longer. He was local head of the Underground movement.

Drake, too, had left his former post with the arrival of the Germans. Now he served the Underground for the sake of two loves—love of Charmand's daughter, Roselle, and love of freedom.

They had been partners together in this movement to free France, but now—

"Why did you send Roselle to the Chateau?" Eric Drake demanded.

Again Pierre Charmand was evasive. "Are you afraid of the ghosts, too?" he mocked.

"Nonsense," Drake snapped. "It's not ghosts she's likely to run into there. It's Germans!"

Charmand chuckled.

"I know," he replied. "And that is precisely why I sent her. The news has come to me that *gauleiter* Hassman plans to visit the Chateau tonight. It is necessary for one of us to arrive before he does."

Both men were silent for a moment, thinking of Hassman. Hassman, the new *gauleiter,* was instituting a reign of terror in the little town of Dubonne. He took French machinery, and French gold, and now he was planning to take French manhood to ship to Germany. His troops, his Gestapo squads, his spies were everywhere. Charmand and his Underground movement had been sadly subdued under the iron rule of Hassman.

"What does Hassman want at the chateau?" Drake asked, breaking the silence.

"Can't you guess?" Charmand replied.

"There's nothing of value there," Drake mused. "The old castle has been deserted since the family was killed in the French Revolution. The peasants say their ghosts still haunt the spot—but I'd guess it's probably filled with dust, cobwebs, and bats. Nobody would care to visit it."

"Exactly." Charmand shrugged "And

that is why I thought of it as an ideal hiding-place."

"Hiding-place?"

"Yes. When the Germans came here to Dubonne, my last official act as mayor was to dispose of the state papers. Not the ordinary documents, you understand, but the secret files—just a few sheets of value buried away in the archives at the City Hall.

"These I determined to preserve at any cost, for their historical significance. So I cast about for a suitable hiding-place. While you were so busily sending dispatches on Nazi troop movements to your newspaper, I was scurrying up the hill to conceal those papers at the Chateau D'Ivers."

"You hid them there?"

"Yes, there. I placed them in an iron casket and concealed them in a spot I alone knew—a secret drawer in the mantel over the old fireplace.

"I thought they would be safe. But somehow Hassman must have learned, because I received word today that he is sending a squad to the chateau this evening

"Naturally, they must not be allowed to find those papers. That is why I sent Roselle this afternoon."

Drake scowled.

"But why did you send your own daughter—a girl—on such a risky mission?"

"Because of the risk," Charmand explained. He rose and went to the window. Drawing aside the blinds he pointed at the streets outside. "Look, my friend," he said. "Look at the streets of Dubonne. Every block patroled by Nazi swine. What one of our people could walk unchallenged through those streets and up to the Chateau in broad daylight? Certainly not you or I, nor Marcel, Antoine, Phillipe, Jean—none of our men. No, only a woman could go forth on such an errand; a woman we can trust. So I sent Roselle."

"But it's twilight now," Drake objected. "She should be back, shouldn't she? And the Nazis will be going up there—"

Pierre Charmand bit his upper lip and turned away.

"You're worried now, aren't you?" Drake accused. "You know it was a foolhardy scheme. That's why you didn't let me in on it. Why, she might be—"

"Don't say it," Charmand whispered.

"Fool!" Drake strode toward the door, fists swinging angrily.

"Where are you going?" muttered the old man.

"I'm going up to the chateau after her," Drake answered.

"But the patrols—"

"Damn the patrols! It's dark, I can slip through them. And I'm going to slip through them. Roselle's up there in that deserted ruin, alone. I'm going to her, now."

DRAKE'S pace never slackened when he reached the cobbled street outside. He thrust his hand deeply into the pocket of his battered trench-coat and gripped the metal of a gun-butt. Scowling, he tramped down a deserted street in grim haste, his eyes intent on the vistas of the deepening twilight.

A telltale clank of metal warned him to draw back into the shadows beside the trees. A Gestapo man passed in gaunt silhouette.

Drake waited until the German had turned the corner, then hastened on.

The upturned collar of his coat served to hide his face—a face already too well known by the German invaders. For Drake, like all the others in the Underground, was marked for death by the Nazis. It was a dangerous game he played here—a game of hide-and-seek in nighted streets; the stakes, his life itself.

The game went on, quietly; silent as death. And Drake worked his way up the street toward the hill beyond. Every stop, each delay, each moment spent in hiding or eluding a patrolman, was torture to the man. For Roselle was up there on the hilltop. He must get to her at once.

But a rising moon peered with bloating face over the ruined walls by the time Drake hastened up the pathway that led to the Chateau D'Ivers. The mouldering walls masked a mystery—a mystery shrouded in silence. Drake's ears heard no sound from within. His eyes saw no light save that of the cold and grinning moon above.

Drake pressed through the tangled weeds overrunning an ancient pathway.

He moved warily now, keeping well under the shadows of the gnarled trees.

If the Germans were here—

But there were no Germans.

There was only silence and decay. A fetid stench seemed to emanate palpably from the great, moss-grown stones of the chateau's walls. The ruined spires leered at the moon, and broken windows, like the eyeless sockets of skulls, stared blindly at the night.

Drake neared the doorway, observed with a start that the great carved door swung open on creaking hinges. He caught a glimpse of yawning vistas beyond.

Roselle must be in there, now. Unless—

Drake stifled an oath as he caught the flutter of movement from behind the door.

Something was emerging!

Eric Drake's hand went to his gun. He jerked the muzzle upwards, held it ready, and then—

A cloud of black horror spiraled from the doorway and streamed upwards to the sky.

"Bats!" he muttered.

As the squeaking and chittering column soared aloft, Drake repressed a shudder. He thought of ancient legends, of the monstrous rumors that clustered thicker than the moss about the walls of the chateau.

And Roselle, all alone there in the darkness—

But what if she were not *alone?*

The thought was a lash. Drake half-ran up the stone steps, dashed through the open doorway.

"Roselle!" he whispered.

THERE was no answer—no answer save for a sibilant echo that slithered from the cold walls of the hallway in which he stood.

Here, in the lair of darkness, Drake pondered which way to turn. Where was the room with the fireplace? Where was Roselle? Should he risk calling her?

He hesitated for a moment—and then his doubts were resolved.

For silence shattered in a single scream.

Drake knew the voice. Roselle!

A shot rang out from the left. Its echo boomed through the corridors, and Drake went into action.

He darted toward the doorway to his left, entered the room, and reeled back a step.

Yes, the fireplace was there, and the mantel above it. Faint moonlight revealed the scene—but Drake had eyes only for the slim, alluring body of the girl on the floor. It was Roselle.

And above her a shape hovered in the semi-darkness; such a shape as is born only in the depths of nightmare. Black, cloaked, hooded, it bent over the girl in an attitude of gloating menace. A black paw clutched something to the cloaked breast, and then—the figure was gone.

Even as Drake dashed forward, the shape seemed to melt into the shadows against the farther wall and disappear.

Then Drake was kneeling beside the girl, raising her head, whispering to her.

Roselle opened her eyes. She was unhurt; Drake saw that. The girl was conscious, too—but not wholly so, for she screamed again. "Eric!" she cried. "Eric, you're here!"

"Yes," he whispered. "Everything's all right."

"But where is he?" sobbed the girl. "Where is the thing I saw—*the thing in the Iron Mask?*"

2. The Man without a Face

MOONLIGHT streamed through the ruined windows.

Drake stared deep into the girl's eyes and read her fear. He shook his head. The fear was plain to see, but there was no hysteria.

"He wore an iron mask over his face," Roselle repeated, softly. "I saw him as plainly as I see you. He wasn't a ghost."

Eric Drake nodded thoughtfully.

"That's plain to see," he murmured. "Ghosts don't steal valuable papers. And ghosts don't leave footprints."

He pointed to the floor, where moonbeams glittered upon the silver carpet of the dust. The mouldering motes had been disturbed by footprints—the prints of Roselle's high-heeled slippers and the flat, broader prints of a man's shoes.

Drake saw the incoming tracks, and his gray eyes swerved to observe the prints retreating once more along the castle halls beyond the chamber.

"He went that way," Drake snapped, rising to his feet.

"Eric—you're going to follow?"

"I must." Drake drew Roselle to her feet, placed his hands on her shoulders in a gesture of reassurance.

"You've got to get out of here before Hassman's men show up," he told her. "Go back and report to your father. Tell him what happened—and tell him I'm on the track of those papers. I'll see him at the meeting later tonight."

"But Eric—you're not going to follow him alone?"

"He has the papers. We must get them back. And he can't have gone far in the past five minutes. If I hurry—"

"But you can't go!" There was more than fear in Roselle's dark eyes. Eric laughed.

"He's only a man, no matter what kind of a disguise he's wearing. And I've got a gun."

"Guns won't help you," she whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't want to tell you this—but I shot at him. And hit him."

"There's no blood," Drake observed.

"Yes, that's right. There's no blood. I shot him in the head—and there was no blood. He didn't stop. He's a monster, I tell you—"

"Stop it, Roselle!" Drake shook her shoulders. "You hit the iron mask, of course. I tell you, nothing supernatural leaves footprints like these. And as long as I see footprints, I'll follow. Now—get out of here, fast."

A long kiss belied the harshness of his command. Then Drake stepped back, wheeled, and plunged into the dark passage beyond the castle chamber. His eyes followed the blurred tracks in the dust.

Ahead was only darkness and silence—deep darkness, deeper silence. Drake never wavered. As he entered the musty

corridor the moonlight faded. He snapped on a pencil-flash and groped his way around a turn in the corridor.

The way led down, but the tracks were still plainly visible in the beam of the flash. Drake plodded along.

A winding passageway turned the castle ruins into a veritable maze—a black, forbidding maze that reeked of ancient decay, lurking death. But Drake followed the footprints; footprints that lured him ever deeper into the nighted depths where dwelt the strange silence and the sable shrouds woven by shadows.

Crumbling walls loomed and leered in the heart of the dank inner chambers. The pencil-flash disclosed tunnel mouths and openings on every side, but Drake's eyes were fastened on the plain trail of the fugitive's footprints.

They led him on, they led him down—they might lead him to the gates of hell—but where they went, he could follow. And he must follow.

He increased his pace. Was the attacker hurrying to some chosen spot? Was there a grim purpose in this plainly marked trail?

Would Drake round a bend and be confronted with a waiting presence? Did something lurk in the shadows, crouching to spring?

He strained his ears against silence, but could not read the secret prisoned by the night.

And then—

Abruptly Drake turned the corner at the end of the winding passageway. The footprints led him to a wall and halted; halted against a blank expanse of gray stone.

Drake's pencil-flash swept the flagstones at his feet. Drake's eyes swept the expanse of wall.

Then he fathomed the secret.

"Subterranean exit," he muttered. "Probably another concealed opening."

His surmise proved to be correct. His groping fingers, running swiftly over the surface of the wall above the spot where footprints ended, soon encountered the press-pivot.

A section of wall opened silently—surprisingly, for a mechanism undoubtedly worn by age and rusty with disuse.

Drake stood on the threshold of the tunnel only long enough to play his pencil-flash on the flooring ahead. He saw the footprints, and followed.

Damper, deeper darkness . . . secret, sepulchral silence . . . and ever the footprints beckoning him on to the brink of unguessable gulfs beyond.

And then, quite suddenly, he emerged. A bend in the tunnel brought him abruptly to a slanting fissure of rock—a fissure through which moonlight streamed. The secret passageway led out of the castle to the lower hillside beyond!

Now there were no footsteps to follow. But Drake saw something better—a figure!

THERE in the bright moon's rays wound the road down the hillside; and on the road Drake discerned the black, grotesquely bobbing shape of the fugitive.

Although the moon was bright, Drake saw no glitter of steel from the head of the fleeing man; at this distance it seemed as though his head, like his entire body, was shrouded in black. Black, crawling like a spiderous shape, the figure moved through moonlight down the road ahead.

Drake reached for his automatic, at the same time pocketing his pocket-flash once more. The action was symbolic. All in a moment the man was transformed from a searcher to a hunter.

He started down the hillside road at a steady trot. The figure didn't turn back. Perhaps the fugitive hadn't heard him. Exulting in his luck, Drake pressed forward, closing the gap between them. His eyes, ever alert for sudden movement, came to abrupt and unexpected focus—not on the fugitive, but on the road far below him.

Other figures were crawling up the hillside from below!

Other figures were swarming purpose-

fully along the hill. Drake, even at this distance, recognized the ugly outlines of military helmets.

Gauleiter Hassman's men—the Gestapo squad was coming to ransack the chateau!

Drake stepped back momentarily.

This was a situation he was not prepared for. The Gestapo would reach the stranger before he could. And perhaps the fugitive was in their employ. He hesitated.

But the black-clad fugitive did not hesitate.

He must have seen the Gestapo squad at the same time Drake glimpsed them. Now he crouched in the center of the road, against a pile of rocks. The road slanted steeply down before him, and the Germans were toiling upwards just below. The fugitive tugged at the jumble of rocks, pried a boulder free—

Drake gasped.

With a single gesture, the fugitive lifted the gigantic boulder over his head and sent it crashing down upon the helmets of the Nazis below!

The missile struck with crushing accuracy. A Nazi dropped, pinned and writhing under the gigantic stone.

The rest of the squad glanced up, perceived the solitary figure standing with black silhouette against the sky. The Gestapo men scattered, seeking cover behind crags and between crevices in the path below..

Swiftly, unhesitatingly, the fugitive tore another rock free from the face of the cliff beside the path. Once again he raised it, hurled it crashing toward the head of the nearest Nazi.

It missed, and hurtled down the hillside, striking with a force that sent echoes of doom reverberating through the night.

Now the Nazis had produced revolvers. Flame spat toward the black figure in five angry jets. But the fugitive sought no shelter. He stooped again, deliberately, and lifted another huge chunk of granite.

He dropped it squarely on an iron helmet below. There was a scream. And the shots rang out in redoubled tempo. The fugitive, standing amidst a hail of lead, calmly groped for another rock.

There was something magnificent about his lone fight against these odds—something magnificent and not wholly sane.

But that didn't move Drake to subsequent action. His calculations were shrewd.

The fugitive was one man: the Nazis numbered four. The Nazis had guns, while the fugitive had only the rocks. The fugitive still had the casket—Drake could see it hanging in a knapsack strapped to his black back.

If the Nazis won and took the casket, Drake would be fighting against greater odds. If he sided with the fugitive and helped beat the attackers off, he'd have one man to deal with—if he were an enemy and not a friend.

Besides, enemy or friend, the fugitive was killing Germans. And Drake approved of the idea.

He sent the stamp of his approval crashing through the night as his gun spoke.

Bounding forth from cover, Drake joined the solitary stranger in the road, and as the stranger hurled his rocks, Drake aimed and fired each time an iron helmet was exposed from cover on the roadside below.

The stranger turned. For a moment Drake stared into a black hole where a face should be—then realized that his information was correct. The stranger did wear a mask, but not of iron. His features were covered with a black velvet cloth, with two slits for the eyes. From head to foot the fugitive wore black, and he towered like a gaunt ghost in the moonlight.

Drake was conscious of intent scrutiny, but the mysterious one did not speak. He merely grunted, then turned and pried another rock from the hillside. Again he hurled it down with an incredible display of strength. And Drake aimed at a helmet as a Nazi rose from below and fired at them.

Drake could almost swear he saw the stranger flinch as a bullet struck home, but it could not be. For the fugitive stooped stolidly like an automatom, grasped another boulder, and sent it spinning on its deadly mission. Another Nazi screamed, then fell along the hillside as the boulder bounded over his body.

Drake aimed once more. And his aim was true. Another Nazi fell. And his remaining companion suddenly turned and scuttled back down the road. The stranger rolled another boulder down—Drake fired at the running target—but the solitary surviving Gestapo man vanished far below.

Then, and only then, the fugitive turned his fantastically masked visage toward Drake and extended a black-gloved hand.

"Merci beaucoup," he whispered.

THE voice was curiously soft, the French phrasing curiously stilted.

"My thanks, *Monsieur,"* whispered the stranger in the mask. "How can I ever repay you?"

In an instant Drake was at his side, the muzzle of his gun pressing into the stranger's back.

"That's simple," Drake grinned. "You can repay me by handing over the casket in your knapsack—the casket you stole from the chateau."

For a moment the stranger stood silent. Then, abruptly, a whispering chuckle rose from the depths behind the black velvet mask.

"What's so amusing?" Drake snapped.

"But this is too incredible!" chuckled the stranger. "Can it be that you also wish to secure this casket?"

"Can be," said Drake, laconically. "Hand it over."

The stranger didn't move.

"It is all right," he whispered. "I know about the papers it contains. I was merely set on rescuing it from the Nazis."

Drake's gun dug deeper, emphasizing his impatience.

"Never mind that," he insisted. "Hand it over. I happen to know that you stole this casket from a girl in the chateau."

"Was she one of our people?" whispered the stranger. "I did not know, or else I should not have interfered. I thought I was the only one who suspected the Nazis were coming."

Drake hesitated only a moment.

"Who are you?" he snapped.

"You know we don't ask for names," parried the stranger. "But I can give you the password."

"Give it to me, then."

"Silence."

Drake heard the whispered word and lowered his weapon.

He could not doubt the watchword of the Underground.

This stranger was one of the organization, working for the freedom of France. And in accordance to the code of the Underground he need not reveal any compromising information as to his identity.

Still, Drake could not free himself from misgivings. He stared again at the masked features, the gloved hands of the mysterious man in black.

The stranger turned, shrugged.

"Why do I wear a mask? Why do I conceal my hands with gloves?" His whisper came faintly.

"The explanation is simple, if unpleasant. I was a soldier, *Monsieur.* A soldier of France—yes. It happened during the retreat from the Maginot line. The tanks came over and the men with the *flammenwerfers*—the flame-throwers. They burned my face and body.

"When I was found, I was given up for dead. But at the hospital in Paris they worked to save my life. In this they succeeded, but they could not save my face. You understand? That is why I conceal my hands and body, because of the scars. And I must conceal what they gave me in place of a face."

The whispering voice was bitter, harsh, intense.

"They wanted to keep me there, an invalid. But I have work to do. I have a

debt to repay to the Nazi horde. I left the hospital, made contact with the Underground. They could not use me in Paris, because of my—deformity. So I have been fighting alone, in my own way.

"I came here. By chance I learned the local *gauleiter* had ordered a raid on the chateau. I did not know his purpose, but I came, thinking to anticipate his search. I found the girl taking this casket. I could not stop to make inquiries. I took the casket, fled—and you know the rest."

Drake nodded. "Ours is a fortunate meeting," he said. "You are mistaken if you think the Underground has no place for you. You have great strength and greater courage. I shall be happy to accompany you to our headquarters tonight—we are holding an important meeting. Let me introduce you to Charmand, our leader. He'll find a place for you."

"But I can't," the stranger whispered. "If they should see me—"

"Perhaps your features are repulsive," Drake answered, cautiously. "But it does not matter, I assure you. No matter what they did to your face—"

"You don't understand," groaned the stranger. "I have no face. They gave me *something else*. You fool, don't you realize what they did to me? Look, then!"

A black-gloved hand rose to the stranger's swathed throat. A single convulsive gesture ripped the black velvet covering from his head.

Drake stared at what leered forth in the gleaming moonlight; stared at the glaring horror that rose from the stranger's shoulders, stared at the dreadful reality of what Roselle Charmand had hinted.

For the stranger had no face. Set in an iron grin, brazen as doom, was a grimacing iron mask!

3. The Gauleiter Strikes

"WHAT is the word?" demanded Pierre Charmand. The tall, bald-headed old Frenchman stared at the masked stranger, a glitter of proud challenge flashing from his stern blue eyes.

"Silence," whispered the voice from behind the black velvet covering.

Dubonne's Underground leader nodded slowly. Then Pierre Charmand turned to Eric Drake, standing at the masked man's side.

"Who is this man and where did you encounter him?" he asked.

Drake told the story, simply and without hesitation. "I think that he can help us," he said. "And he has brought the casket."

Pierre Charmand's eyes sparkled.

"That is well!" he said. "It is very important that we of the Underground retain possession of those documents in the casket. All of the ancient official papers of Dubonne are contained here—some of them were rescued from the days of the Revolution. *Gauleiter* Hassman would give his right arm to possess them."

He rose and extended his hand. It was grasped by the black-gloved hand of the burned soldier in the iron mask.

Drake stood watching the weird tableau—and weird it was.

For the three of them were in the headquarters of Dubonne's Underground—the warehouse of the local brewery.

Surrounded by mountains of barrels, they crouched in a vast chamber; the light of a single candle rising to cast eerie shadows over casks and tuns. It was as though they were met in the great wine-cellar of some fabled ogre—these three incongruous figures; old Frenchman, young American, and creature garbed in the black nightmare of his cloak and hood.

Appreciation of the grotesque scene sounded in a sudden scream.

All three wheeled and faced the doorway.

Roselle Charmand stood there, one hand covering her red lips as she cut short the sound that might betray them to the world outside.

But her blue eyes were wide with horror as she saw her father shaking hands

with the creature that had attacked her.

"*Mon pere,*" she gasped. "He is here!"

Pierre Charmand nodded and stroked his mustache as he gave her a reassuring smile.

"Do not be alarmed, my daughter," he said. "Drake can explain everything."

"Drake—oh, Eric, you're safe! And you've captured the attacker!"

"Well, not exactly," Drake grinned. "Let me tell you what's happened."

He did so, sitting on an overturned cask at the girl's side. She listened, and gradually the fear left her face.

Meanwhile Pierre Charmand conferred with the man wearing the mask. Drake concluded his story just in time to catch the purport of the Underground leader's remarks.

"And so you see," he was concluding, "I have called a meeting for tonight—here. Within the hour all members of the Underground in Dubonne and the surrounding countryside will be assembled.

"We have word that *gauleiter* Hassman is about to issue an order summoning all able-bodied males to forced labor in Germany. Naturally, we must act at once. We must plan an effort to sabotage that campaign."

The iron mask bobbed up and down in agreement.

Pierre Charmand sighed. "There is but one disappointment," he admitted. "I had hoped tonight to have a full report on just when Hassman would strike, and where; how many men he was going to conscript and what method he would use. Two or three of our people have attempted to intercept such a report. But I must confess failure. Now, with the meeting set for midnight—and only an hour to go—I have no report on which to base our plan of campaign."

"Midnight," whispered the man in the mask. "One hour to go."

He rose, suddenly, purposefully.

"Where are you going?" asked Pierre Charmand.

"You say there is an hour," came the whisper. "Perhaps I can do something."

"You mean you can get the report?" breathed Pierre Charmand. "But how?"

The iron-masked man shrugged, heaving his shoulders clumsily. "Do not inquire as to methods," he whispered. "I have developed a certain—technique—in such matters. Rest assured, I shall return with the information you desire."

There was a flurry of black, and the man disappeared from the brewery vault.

Charmand stared at his daughter and Drake and slowly duplicated the departed man's shrug.

"Who knows?" he said. "Perhaps it can be done."

Roselle trembled in Drake's embrace. "He frightens me," she whispered. "Somehow, I have the feeling that he's holding something back—something he hasn't told us."

"We must have faith," Drake reassured her. "But now, there's work to be done."

THE three of them put their heads together in the candlelight; Pierre Charmand's grizzled bald dome, Drake's straight-haired sandy head, and Roselle's cascaded cloud of dark curls all bent forward over the table, and Pierre Charmand began to issue instructions in a low murmur.

As he spoke, the door at the end of the room began to open and close swiftly as Underground members suddenly filtered singly into the room.

They came and came, but always they walked alone. Pious housewives, staid old business men, grinning laborers and gnarled, sunburned farmers appeared and silently took seats on upturned casks in a semi-circle about the table.

Soon a score of them were assembled, waiting for the moment of meeting. Drake lifted his gaze from the papers on the table, glanced at his wristwatch.

Midnight.

"It's time," he told Charmand. "And our friend has not returned."

But even as he spoke the words, the

door at the end of the room swung open, and the black cloak of the masked man swirled into the room.

Ignoring the stares of the assemblage, he strode to the table with thundering tread.

A gloved hand swept out, and a white paper fluttered down.

"Here is a report of Hassman's proposed operations," he muttered, in his peculiarly husky voice.

Pierre Charmand raised his eyebrows. "Good work," he said. "Was it—safe?"

"Do you mean, have I been discovered? The answer's no. And I don't think I've been followed, either. The sentry posted outside of the entrance upstairs says that we're all here. You can call the meeting, then. We're safe."

The masked figure sat down awkwardly upon an upturned cask near the table. Drake and Roselle found seats, and Pierre Charmand rose and confronted the meeting of the Underground.

"Comrades," he began. "You all know for what purpose we are met tonight. Ordinarily I'd call for your reports and and then take up the matter at hand.

"But I have just received information of vital importance concerning our next plan of operations. A new comrade has succeeded where others have failed—you saw him come in just now.

"Therefore I beg leave of you to examine the information he has just brought in. I should like to be able to pass it on to you immediately, for it concerns our future."

There were nods of assent and murmurs of approval from the audience.

Slowly, Pierre Charmand unfolded the paper the cloaked man had brought to him.

And then—

Hell broke loose.

Without warning came the thundering on the stairs outside the door. Without warning, the rattle of machine-gun fire resounded through the hollow brewery vault.

The door guarding the warehouse crashed in splinters and into the room poured a swarm of gray-clad figures.

"Hassman!" screamed Roselle Charmand.

A DOZEN pairs of eyes had recognized the burly figure in the doorway.

The squat, bullet-headed *gauleiter* was a familiar figure in Dubonne—a figure of terror. Terror stood in that doorway now, and his pudgy hands held two spitting Lugers.

A woman's wail of fear died in a spatter of bullets. And then the Underground acted. With a flick of the wrist, Pierre Charmand struck the candle from the table, plunging the vault chamber into total darkness. Men and women ran like rats.

But the darkness was not complete. Red bursts of machine-gun fire spat deadly lightning into the room. The surprised Underground members crouched behind tuns and vats. A few were armed, and they returned the fire of the Nazis as the soldiers swept into the room, raking the walls with their portable machine-gun units.

Over and above the chatter of death rose the screams of the trapped Frenchmen and the guttural commands and curses of *gauleiter* Hassman.

The Nazis advanced, groping their way as the Underground defenders rolled beer barrels in their path and toppled casks. Vats pierced by bullets gushed forth amber streams. Soon the Nazis waded ankle-deep on their errand of death.

But they came on. Several fell, crushed by barrels or riddled by the answering bullets of the Underground. Yet they advanced, and it was a ghastly game of hide and seek played there in the darkness as the machine-guns barked, and their tongues of flame lapped out to lick the bodies of the French in a caress of death.

Drake grasped Roselle by the shoulders, drawing her behind the nearest sheltering

pile of barrels. "Stay here," he yelled above the din.

Then he stole forth to the center of the room, groping his way toward the table.

The casket from the chateau rested there; he had seen the masked man place it next to the candle before he sat down.

His hand went out, encountered its cold outlines. He grasped it. An iron grasp encircled his wrist.

Drake lashed out. His fist struck velvet—then iron beneath the velvet.

"Oh, it's you!" he exclaimed. "Had the same idea, eh?"

The hand relaxed its grip on his wrist but did not let go.

"It's me—Drake!" yelled the American.

"Oh." The whisper came and the hand fell away as Drake grasped the casket.

"Come on," Drake said. "Follow me. I think there's another exit. We'd better get out of here fast—there's no hope of resisting."

It was grim truth he spoke.

THE tide of battle was flowing unmistakably in favor of the Nazis. Through the darkness they advanced squad on squad, wading through the spilled liquor in a relentless search for the few remaining Underground members yet alive.

Drake groped his way back to Roselle's side. "Follow me," he commanded. The three of them stole cautiously along a row of tuns against the wall.

"There's an emergency loading chute set somewhere in the wall, as I remember," Drake shouted, above the din of battle. "Wait—I think I've got it."

His outstretched hand rested on an iron handle. He would tug it open and then—

"What about Father," gasped Roselle. "Where is he?"

The answer came grimly.

A sudden hail rattled above their heads. Bullets thudded into the wall. Running feet rounded the corridor of tuns to their left.

Pierre Charmand, panting and exhausted, stumbled blindly into his daughter's arms.

"*Mon pere*—we're safe! Follow us to escape," the girl shouted.

Drake raised the door by the iron handle set in the wall. "We'll have to crawl through," he warned them.

His admonition was drowned out by the thunder of booted feet thudding down the corridor toward them. Another burst of machine-gun fire swept the air above their crouching figures.

"Now!" whispered Drake.

Quickly, he pushed Roselle Charmand through the doorway. She crawled ahead on hands and knees. Drake bent to follow. Then came the ghastly horror of the light.

Gauleiter Hassman had found a flashlight—and its cold beams swept over the bent bodies of Drake, Charmand, and the iron-masked man.

And with the beam, came bullets. The Nazis behind Hassman opened fire.

"Quick!" Drake warned. He rose and kicked out at the nearest pile of barrels. They fell to barricade the corridor. Pierre Charmand straightened up. His great arms encircled another column of stacked barrels, sent it crashing.

THE iron-masked man also rose. Together he and Charmand heaved against a row of kegs. They began to topple. If they fell, the Nazis would be crushed beneath the kegs. If they fell—

But the bullets fell first.

A red knife cut through Pierre Charmand's waist. A score of slugs tore the grizzled Frenchman almost in two. Sick with horror, Drake saw him fall.

The bullets swerved, and now the iron-masked man was raked by the missiles of death.

But he did not fall!

Drake saw the red line cross his body as the bullets struck—but the man stood like a statue, straining at the row of kegs and casks.

And even as Drake watched, the

stranger in the iron mask gave a single massive wrench of his shoulders and sent the entire column of kegs crashing down upon the heads and shoulders of the Nazi gunners.

Then, "Come on," he whispered, and dived through the open loading entrance. Drake followed, before the booming echoes of the fallen barrels had ceased resounding through the vault behind them.

The door clanged shut and they crawled forward in utter darkness. Soon they had overtaken Roselle.

"What happened?" she whispered. "Where is Father?"

"Don't talk," muttered Drake, fiercely. "Keep moving. They may follow."

Through the stifling confines of the loading chute they moved on hands and knees. Drake clutched the casket to his breast. He heard Roselle's strident breathing, heard his own gasps. But the iron-masked stranger was silent.

And then, at last, their bursting lungs knew relief as Drake reached the other end of the chute and cautiously pushed up the hatchway leading to the alley behind the brewery.

He stared out at a moon-drenched, deserted expanse of streets. The Nazi trucks were around the corner in front of the brewery.

"Come on," he urged. "We can get away now."

"Where are we going?" Roselle muttered.

"Follow me—no time to explain," Drake flung over his shoulder as he started down the alley at a steady trot. Girl and stranger joined him.

Wordlessly, Drake led them on; led them surely and unerringly. They toiled up a steep hillside, Drake in the lead.

Suddenly the girl put a hand across her mouth to stifle a gasp of fear. She pointed to the pathway ahead.

"Look there!" she whispered. "A Nazi!"

"A dead Nazi," said Drake, grimly. "We killed him earlier this evening."

"We?"

The masked stranger nodded at the girl. "We're climbing the path where Drake and I fought off the Gestapo squad," he explained.

"There's a cave leading out of the chateau at the top," Drake told her. "I think we'll be safe there for a while."

Only when they reached the cavern did he permit the girl and the masked stranger to halt. It was several minutes more before they were able to speak.

SLOWLY, gently, Drake went about the unpleasant task of explaining Pierre Charmand's absence.

"He died for France," Drake said. "And so did the others. We alone are left to carry on the fight. And we should not be here now if our friend had not acted."

Drake turned to the masked stranger.

"That was a heroic stunt of yours," he commented. "Standing there in the direct line of machine-gun fire to pull down those kegs on Hassman's men."

An awkward shrug was his only answer.

But this did not satisfy Drake. His eyes rested on the masked man intently.

"There is just one detail you might explain," Drake drawled.

"And what is that, *Monsieur?*" came the whispering response.

"Just how you pulled that little trick and still managed to remain alive," Drake challenged. "Because—I *saw* at least fifty bullets strike your body!"

There was a moment of tense silence.

Again, an awkward shrug from the stranger. He raised his arms, slowly. Drake and the girl followed his movements. Once again, the masked man removed the black velvet covering from his face. Once again, in the light of the moon streaming through the mouth of the cavern, they gazed on the iron horror of the mask he wore.

Drake noted the silvery surface of the metal, and his keen gaze encompassed many details he hadn't remembered. The

mask was not covering the face alone, but extended like a brazen helmet over his entire head, terminating tightly at the neck where the cloak reached up to cover its edges.

And the iron mask bore—bullet scars. Fully a dozen indentations were visible on the battered surface of the grisly monstrosity.

Drake's gaze never wavered. A deep sigh came from behind the mask.

"Very well," whispered the stranger. "I can no longer conceal the truth from you. I am not human—but immortal."

"Immortal?"

The iron visage bobbed in assent.

"Then—who are you, really?"

"I? the whisper came. "I am—*The Man in the Iron Mask!*"

4. Masque de Fer

"YOU are the Man in the Iron Mask?" gasped Drake.

Incredulity shone in his eyes. Roselle's piquant features contorted in puzzled disbelief.

But the stranger shook his iron visage slowly in assent.

"I am," he whispered.

"But the Iron Mask legend is hundreds of years old," Drake objected.

"So am I," whispered the stranger. "And I can assure you that the story is no legend. While the truth is known to me alone, it is still a matter of historically accepted fact that I lived. All that remains unknown is the fact that I am still alive. Yes, alive—and here to save France in her hour of need!"

Drake and the girl were silent. The Man in the Iron Mask hunched forward oddly until he squatted directly before them on the floor of the cavern.

"Naturally I couldn't tell you this before, Drake. I told you that I was a soldier with a burned face—because it was more believable. But now that you've guessed part of my secret by seeing bullets strike me without injuring my body, you may as well know the rest. Know that I am immortal—and why."

"Yes—why?" Drake persisted.

"This is my story," whispered the stranger. "But first, I shall help you to recall the accepted historical version.

"In 1679, a man wearing an iron mask —a *masque de fer*—was sent to the fortress of the Isle Ste. Marguerite, off the coast of Provence.

"He arrived in a closely-guarded coach, escorted by the king's men all the way from Paris—and he was imprisoned on royal order.

"The soldiers caught furtive glimpses of his masked face, and marveled at the curiously-wrought ironwork that screened it. Slits for eyes and nostrils and a hinged jaw for a mouth were all that broke the hideous metal prison that held a human head. Naturally they whispered and wondered.

"At the fortress, the Man in the Iron Mask was received by the Governor, Benigne D'Auvergne de Saint-Mars. Saint-Mars had furnished a special room where the Man in the Iron Mask was to be held captive—a room sumptuously appointed with fine furnishings and luxurious hangings.

"He and he alone had charge of the prisoner's welfare, but rumors leaked out—about the fine food provided for this unusual captive, and the plates of silver and pewter that adorned his table.

"It was also rumored that King Louis XIV's minister, Louvois, was a regular visitor; although no one else was allowed to see this prisoner. Saint-Mars guarded his charge well.

"In 1681 the prisoner, accompanied by Saint-Mars, went to Exiles, near Pignerol, traveling in a closed litter. From 1687 to 1698 he was incarcerated at Pignerol. By this time wild stories were whispered, but although many sought to fathom the identity of the captive, little was learned. He was said to pass his time playing the guitar,

or pacing in his cell—always wearing this curious mask of iron over his face and head

"In 1698 he went to the Bastille with Saint-Mars. Here, in 1703, he died. Keepers scraped and whitewashed his prison walls. The doors and window frames were burned. All of the vessels used in his service were melted down. There was nothing left as evidence to show that for 24½ years a prisoner had actually been a captive of Saint-Mars.

"Since that date, the strange story of the Man in the Iron Mask has become a fascinating plaything for historians and theorists; a great mystery, indeed.

"Was the Man in the Iron Mask really Fouquet, the disgraced minister of finance under Louis XIV? Was he an obscure Armenian patriarch who preached heresy against the throne? Could he have been Comte de Vermandois, the son of Louis XIV and Mademoiselle de la Valliere?

"Was he the Duc de Beaufort? The English Duke of Monmouth? An Italian adventurer named Count Ercolo Matthioli? Or as Dumas would have it, was the Iron Mask really Louis's twin brother?

"In 1789, with the fall of the Bourbons, the records of the Bastille were opened to the public.

"Every prisoner's name and history was inscribed on a register at the time he entered the prison. Surely the secret of Iron Mask would be revealed here!

"But the page bearing the date of his admittance had been carefully torn out of the register!

"The identity of the Man in the Iron Mask has remained a great mystery.

"And well it might be. For I am the Man in the Iron Mask—and I am immortal."

The whispering voice paused momentarily.

Drake glanced at the brazen horror of that head, but he couldn't read a trace of human emotion in the iron, immovable face.

"But you say that the Iron Mask died, was buried in 1703," he objected.

A low chuckle came from under the mask.

"That was all part of the plot," came the answer. "But now, my friends, you shall learn the truth. Who I am—and what I am."

ROSELLE nestled closer to Eric Drake as the Iron Mask again took up his tale.

"My name I shall not reveal, for it was a great one in the annals of France.

"Sufficient to say that I am the son of an alchemist—an alchemist both famous and infamous.

My grandfather was none other than Michel de Notre-Dame."

"Nostradamus!" whispered Eric Drake. "Nostradamus, the prophet!"

"I see you too know history," came the whisper. "Yes, he was indeed the prophet. And my father knew the arts of prophecy which he had learned from Nostradamus. Those arts of divination he taught to me, for I was destined for a brilliant career.

"That was how my father planned it. He was a true seeker of forbidden secrets, a lurker in darkness. But I was to profit from his learning. Young, handsome, equipped with all of his own knowledge and skill, he visioned a great future for me at the court of the Grand Monarch of France.

"Alchemists and prophets were popular, and with my looks I could surely go far.

"I left his home after drinking a toast to the future in mantic brew. And in a short time I arrived in Paris, armed with letters of introduction to those in high places.

"Within a year I was famous. Working only behind the scenes, I gained the confidence and grateful friendship of all the king's ministers. I advised Colbert, the minister of home affairs. Lionne the diplomat sought me out to predict a course of future state policy for France. I knew

Louvois, minister of war, and Fouquet the minister of finance.

"In a quiet way, I was really ruling France! It was only a short time until both de la Valliere and later Madame de Maintenon were coming to me for advice on how to rule King Louis himself!

"But the Grand Monarch learned of this somehow. Through the trickery of a rival, a charlatan, he was told that I had exercised my good looks, youthfulness, and wizard's knowledge to fascinate Madame de Maintenon.

"And Louis, maddened by jealousy, devised this hideous jest of his. I was to be imprisoned, suddenly and quietly—and forced to hide my face behind a mask of iron!

"So it came to pass. I had no trial, no hearing. Although Louvois pleaded for me, the furious Grand Monarch would not heed.

"I was seized, made a captive of Saint-Mars, and condemned to wear the Iron Mask for the rest of my days.

"It was a gruesome sentence indeed—but even Louis didn't realize its true meaning. For the rest of my days would constitute a great span indeed—because I was immortal!

"Yes, immortal. The letter from my father reached me secretly; by some tragic irony it arrived only a few hours before I was imprisoned.

"In it my father, who was at the point of death, recalled to me the toast we had drunk together on the day I left for Paris.

"He had given me an alchemic solution—the fabulous goal of his research—an elixir that meant eternal life.

"It sounds fantastic. It did, then. Yet as time went on in that ghastly prison, I realized that I had lost none of my youthful energy. The iron mask was soldered to my face, and I could not remove it to see if my features were aging, but I felt no older after twenty long years than I had on the day I was made a prisoner.

"I shall not dwell on those years—on the frantic, futile efforts I made to escape. Louvois still visited me for advice, and I gave it to him. But King Louis would not hear of my release. He was fanatically determined to keep me under this unnatural punishment until I died.

"Therefore, I determined to die. Saint-Mars, my jailer, had been specially selected by Louis XIV for his unswerving loyalty. He was my only, and constant companion.

"It took me 24 years to wear down his loyalty to the crown. It took me 24 years to persuade him to end this hideous imprisonment of mine, and permit me to escape.

"At last, in the Bastille, he consented. And the opportunity arose. A disgraced Italian secret agent was brought to his care. No one knew that this Matthioli had been made a captive and there was no record. The outside world thought he had disappeared. So I persuaded Saint-Mars not to enter his name on the register. And when Matthioli died, Saint-Mars took word to the king that the Man in the Iron Mask was dead.

"His face was unknown. Louis himself could not be expected to recognize the features of a man shut away for 24 years, his head covered by a mask of iron. The body was accepted, and buried secretly. Then the jailers tore down the room I had occupied and destroyed all evidence of my existence.

"As for me, I was far away.

"I shall never forget that first day of freedom. I bribed a blacksmith with gold, made him remove the hateful mask that hid my features. And then I stared into a mirror—stared and saw the ghastly caricatured lineaments of an old man's face. The face of an ancient madman staring back at me. An old man's face on a young man's body!

"That I was youthful could not be denied. The mysterious elixir was potent in my veins. But my face, concealed by the iron mask, had aged atrociously.

"Then and there I swore to resume the

iron mask that had been my badge of secret shame—resume it and wear it until I could bring glory to France; and in bringing that glory, make the Iron Mask a symbol for the ages.

"Again, I shall omit the greater part of my adventures. I left France and bitter memories and traveled far. I became a sort of Wandering Jew. I shall not speak of the long years, for it is not pleasant to remember them. Living for centuries is not a boon—it is a nightmare.

"Money I found, and my art of prophecy had not deserted me. And always I kept to my vow. Always when France was in peril I appeared.

"Secretly I sought out Louis XVI to disclose Marie Antoinette's intrigue with Count Fersen. As an Egyptian priest I talked with Napoleon in the shadow of the Sphinx; helped him plan his conquests.

"Again, I visited Napoleon III when he languished in a foreign prison as a middle-aged failure. I gave him the plans whereby he later triumphed and became master of the Empire

"Secretly, I have made history. And now—in this hour of need—I am in France again. I am here to help the Underground and make France free. I must help in my own way. There are certain things I can do.

"One asset is the fact that I cannot die. On the other hand, I cannot remove this iron mask—for centuries have turned the horror of my face into a mummy's death-grin. I must work silently, and from below. That is why I am in the Underground."

The furtive whisper ceased, and there was a moment of profound silence in the cavern.

Then Roselle sighed.

"But the Underground is dead here in Dubonne," she said. "We are the only ones who escaped. It is true, we are awaiting word from headquarters in Paris—"

"Word from headquarters?" whispered Iron Mask.

"Yes," Drake assented. "Charmand told me we could expect an important message shortly. There is to be a general plan of revolt to aid the invasion of the Continent. All Underground units in France and Belgium, Holland, Denmark—everywhere—will be given instructions on a course of procedure."

Drake shrugged. "Of course, that means little now, as Roselle says. Hassman has virtually wiped out our unit. We have no headquarters any more, no means of reorganizing and waiting for this message."

The Iron Mask nodded.

"I think I can solve our problem," he whispered. "I have taken steps to arrange matters in anticipation of an emergency like this."

Roselle turned to the immortal one, bewilderment in her eyes.

"But where can we go?" she murmured. "Hassman's men are searching for us now. They'll come here soon to find us—and they'll cover any possible future meeting place we might select. Where can we establish the Underground now?"

"Underground," said Iron Mask.

"Underground? Where?"

"Underground," repeated Iron Mask. "From now on we will establish our headquarters—under the offices of *gauleiter* Hassman!"

5. Under the Nazi Heel

DAWN came, and daylight, brilliant noon, and then twilight once again—but Drake and Roselle slept. Iron Mask stolidly declined to rest, but stood guard at the entrance-way until darkness fell.

Only once did he slip away during the day, returning shortly with food.

A meal of sorts awaited man and girl when they awoke. "Help yourselves," came the whisper from behind the mask. "I've already eaten."

"Where did you get the food?" Roselle inquired. Iron Mask shrugged.

"I'm an old hand at this sort of life," he

replied. "But come—finish your meal. We've got to move to our new headquarters tonight."

"About that matter," said Drake, "I still don't see what you mean by saying we can go under the *gauleiter's* offices."

Iron Mask rose awkwardly and waved an arm, stiffly. "Surely you know that Hassman and his men are quartered in the old city hall?"

"Yes," said Roselle. "When my father was mayor, he—" The girl stopped, her voice choking as she remembered the death of Pierre Charmand.

Iron Mask compassionately ignored her distress. "Very well. Beneath the city hall is the cellar regulating the sewerage system installed here back in the 1870 era of the Republic. You must remember? They built the city hall over it; some idea of municipal building with the controls all emanating from a central point.

"Of course, since the Nazis have come, the municipal sewerage system has been abandoned. I doubt very much if they are even aware that there is a sub-cellar under the city hall. Certainly no one ever goes down there.

"I investigated today, and it is quite safe. Of course, the tunnels and pipes aren't very safe any more, but we shall be in the cellar itself."

Drake turned, eyebrows raised in objection.

"Just how do you propose we get to the cellar?" he asked. "Are we to march through the city hall under Hassman's nose and ask to be directed to the cellar stairs?"

"We'll get there in the same manner that I did this afternoon," Iron Mask explained. "We'll crawl through the empty pipes. There's an outlet right below this hill. The damned-up sewage still in the pipes is trapped in a second parallel pipe. Our pipe is dry and free—it's fully seven feet in diameter, and we can walk through it."

"Just like Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables!*" exclaimed Roselle.

Iron Mask nodded gravely. "We must be careful, though. The pipe is brittle with age and rust. A sudden shock might cause it to burst and the parallel pipe would discharge its flow and flood us out. I'm afraid, on second thought, that it's no place for a young lady."

"Nonsense! exclaimed Roselle. "I'm going with you and Drake. There's work to be done. At least we'll have a safe place to wait until we get word from Paris tomorrow. Then we can make other plans."

"Come, then," said Iron Mask.

They left the cavern and descended the hillside cautiously. The moon was bright again, and they clung to the shadowed surface of the rocks lest a passing patrol note their moving figures.

Black-cloaked Iron Mask led them to the forbidding mouth of the pipe, jutting out of the base of the hill above the bank of the river that wound below Dubonne. Once again his great strength came into play as he lifted a huge iron cylinder covering the opening.

"I don't know why they didn't drain the parallel pipe when they shut off the sewerage system," he whispered. "It was probably abandoned very hastily. But this pipe is free. Come on—Drake, use that pencil-flash of yours to guide us. It's dark in here."

It was dark. It was also hot, and unbearably fetid. But somehow, the trio managed to flounder through the long passageway, walking inside a pipe bored in the earth.

Now they were truly "Underground" in every sense of the word!

Relief came at last as they reached the end of the straight span of pipe, rounded a curve that sloped upwards. The going was slow, but they made it. Eventually Iron Mask lifted the huge disk overhead and they clambered up the iron rungs of a ladder.

"The head of the pipe is connected directly with the drainage pool under the streets," Iron Mask explained. "But this

exit leads to the floor of the cellar in the city hall."

And so it did. They climbed the iron rungs of the ladder to emerge in the musty cellar.

"Oh!" Roselle exclaimed, "you've prepared for our coming!"

It was true. From somewhere, Iron Mask had unearthed several cots, some blankets, and a few cartons containing a stack of provisions. There was even an old, battered oil lamp which he proceeded to light, his gloved fingers moving clumsily as he struck a match and held it to the wick.

"What's that?" muttered Drake, as an ominous creaking sounded overhead.

IRON MASK uttered a rasping chuckle. "Probably Hassman pacing the floor and worrying over our escape," he whispered. "Don't forget, we're in the cellar directly beneath him."

"Then those stairs must lead to a door in the city hall," Drake decided, pointing to a dusty flight across the cellar.

"True, but the door is barred. They have never come down here and never will," muttered Iron Mask. "We're safe here. And now—"

"And now it's time for me to keep my appointment," Drake snapped, glancing at his watch and re-winding it.

"Drake—do you know where to go?" Roselle asked, anxiously.

"Yes. I have my instructions." From the folds of his trench jacket Drake produced the casket of official papers.

"I am to turn this over to the Paris Underground agent and receive my instructions," he said.

"But Drake, how will you recognize him? Where will you meet?"

"Your father gave me full details," Drake assured her.

"But they must have men out watching for us," Roselle objected. "They know we escaped them the other night. It's broad daylight outside, Eric. They'll hunt you down."

Drake smiled and patted her shoulder.

"Tell you what we'll do," he said. "We'll beat them at their own game and try a bit of spying ourselves.

"My man will be waiting to make contact with me at Antoine's bistro down the street. Roselle, you go through the pipe and come into town from the south. Keep your face down and be sure to step inside the nearest house if you see a Nazi patrol on the streets. But if you can get to Antoine's, just look in and see if you can notice a *cure* carrying a yellow valise. That's my man.

"And you, my friend, can come into town from the north." Drake nodded at Iron Mask. "Naturally, with your cloak and mask you'll be conspicuous. But I'm relying on that. I want the Nazi patrols to spot you—because you can draw them away.

"Owing to your rather peculiar gift of immortality, I don't suppose you fear their bullets. And after witnessing your cleverness and resourcefulness these past hours, I am sure you can elude your pursuers without great danger.

"At any rate, the Nazis will continue to hunt you. If you and Roselle return and Roselle tells me my man is waiting—then I can go up myself to keep the appointment. The Nazis will be off on a wild goose chase in the hills north of town, looking for a man in a mask and a cloak. Right?"

They nodded.

"Then off you go," Drake urged. "Back through the pipe."

They left.

Drake pulled out one of his few remaining cigarettes from a precious package and lit it slowly. Then, quite deliberately, he took out a pack-knife and pried the lid of the metal casket cradled in his lap.

He rummaged through the papers inside until he found a folded yellow sheet. This he read, frowning and muttering to himself as his eyes squinted in the murky lamplight.

Carefully he stuffed the documents back in the casket and lowered the lid.

He doused his cigarette, looked at his watch, frowned again. His head cocked forward as he listened intently for sounds in the city hall above. All was silent. Drake smiled, nodded.

Suddenly he snapped his fingers, sent one hand diving into the pocket of his trench coat and produced a gun.

It cocked with a click.

Drake rose and walked deliberately toward the dusty stairway that led to the city hall above. He climbed the stairs, set his shoulder to the door at the head of the stairway, and stepped into the lair of *gauleiter* Hassman.

6. *The Sewer*

PURE chance had it that Roselle and Iron Mask should meet at the moment both returned to crawl through the sewer pipe.

"Is he waiting?" Iron Mask whispered.

"Yes," said the girl. "I saw him. But the patrols are everywhere. Only a few minutes after I entered town, I saw them swarming down the steps of the city hall. Even Hassman himself came out. I wonder who informed him something was stirring?"

"I did probably," whispered the man in the cloak.

"I let myself be seen very plainly. I've been leading at least three patrols a merry chase across the hills. I managed to dodge down here, but I urge that we hasten out of sight before we're seen."

Again he clumsily lifted the great lid and the two retraced their footsteps through the sewer pipe, moving delicately lest the brittle metal shatter under the impact of their tread.

It was Iron Mask who was the first to emerge in the cellar once again—but it was Roselle who uttered the first gasp of astonishment.

"Eric!" she cried. "Eric's gone!"

Iron Mask whirled in astonishment. "The fool—he must have left while we were away!"

He strode awkwardly toward the room's end where the lamp glowed fitfully, throwing his grotesque shadow across the wall.

"The casket's gone, too," he announced. "There's something queer going on here."

As though stifled by its confining folds, Iron Mask suddenly ripped the black velvet covering from his metal visage and revealed the brazen shield covering his face. His gloved hands went to his iron temples in perplexity.

Roselle, despite her familiarity with the grim mask, couldn't repress a slight tremor of distaste. There was something unnatural about this immortal adventurer. His husky voice, his clumsiness, and his penchant for cloaking his body and features in black—this, coupled with the brazen, leering mask that served to hide his face, caused her to feel a chill of repulsion.

Suddenly, Iron Mask lumbered toward her.

"Where is he?" came the whisper. "It's a conspiracy, isn't it? You and he have something planned. He took the casket and deserted me, didn't he? Admit it."

"No," muttered the girl. "He wouldn't do such a thing! Eric is—"

The reply was cut short by an ominous thudding from overhead. Muffled but audible, a revolver shot echoed through the cellar. And then—

The door at the head of the cellar stairs burst open. Eric raced down the steps, panting.

"Come on," he shouted. "Through the sewer pipe. Hurry! Roselle.

"Tell you later," Drake grunted. "Hassman's back. Get into the pipe, quick!"

One hand grasping the metal casket, the other flourishing a revolver, Drake prodded Roselle and Iron Mask toward the floor opening. The clambered down the iron rungs of the ladder until they stood in the dark tunnel of brittle pipe.

Drake followed, and just in time.

Thunder shook the stairs. Hassman was leading his pack into the cellar!

The fat *gauleiter* caught sight of Eric's head as he descended, and before Drake could pull the iron lid into place, the Nazis were upon him.

No time to descend the ladder—Eric leaped to the bottom of the pipe and began to run forward. Iron Mask and Roselle clambered ahead in the utter darkness.

And behind them came the Nazi horde.

There was a scene ripped from nightmare's darkest depths—the three fugitives groping their way through the black, twisted interior of the slippery iron pipe. They ran lightly, lest their tread shatter the brittle surface. Iron Mask had warned them about the danger of break-throughs from the parallel pipe over their heads.

Panting, gasping, sobbing for breath, the trio floundered on. And behind them, the Nazis charged.

Hassman at the head, the entire column clambered down the ladder into the pipe.

And then began the race through darkness . . . the mad, incredible race, punctuated by bursts of flame from Nazi Lugers.

"Hurry!" panted Drake. Roselle clutched his arm as he half-dragged her forward. "They're gaining!" he muttered, as they rounded the bend leading to the end of the pipe.

Iron Mask suddenly stumbled and fell. Drake bit his lip. "Get up!" he hissed. "You're blocking our path—"

He tugged at the fallen figure. Iron Mask rose. But too late.

FOR the great figure of Hassman loomed out of the murky twilight as he rounded the bend in the pipe. Behind him came the gray-clad hunters, and their Lugers spoke—

"Down!" shouted Drake, tugging at the shoulders of his companions. Flame jetted over their heads and an ear-splitting echo resounded throughout the brittle interior of the pipe. Resounded and magnified.

There was a roar and a rumble; a shuddering convulsion that shook the metal under their feet.

"Earthquake!" screamed Roselle.

"No," Drake muttered. "The pipe's broken!"

His words were hardly spoken before dreadful confirmation came.

Whether caused by weight of their running bodies or by the force of concussion reverberations, the pipe had shattered—and now the parallel pipe poured forth its hideous burden.

With a rush and a roar, a torrent of acrid liquid gushed down upon the heads of the Nazis.

They turned, screaming, but there was no escape. In a moment the entire length of pipe behind them filled with a raging flood of boiling, churning debris.

"Run!" yelled Drake.

There was no need to command. The trio took to their heels and not a moment too soon. They clambered along the pipe as the roaring waters engulfed the Nazis behind them.

And then they were clambering out of the pipe mouth on the hillside, racing up the road toward the cave.

But Hassman and his men did not follow. As they ran up the road, Drake glanced over his shoulder. He saw the torrent surge out of the pipe mouth and spout down in a stream to the river. Gray bodies whirled in its crest—and he knew that Hassman and his men would no longer patrol the streets of Dubonne. They had drowned in the sewer, like the rats they were.

Panting with exhaustion, Drake and Roselle entered the safety of the cavern. Iron Mask strode stolidly beside them.

Roselle forced a smile to her lips.

"It's wonderful, Eric," she murmured. "We seem to be spending our entire life just running from one underground hole to another. And all because of this silly casket—"

"I can solve that."

Iron Mask stood in the doorway, blotting out the exit. The whisper came from between metal-shrouded lips.

"What's that?" Drake said.

"I can promise you that this is the last refuge you need ever seek," he whispered. "Just give the casket to me."

"But I'm to turn it over to the Paris representative—"

"Give it to me, now."

Iron Mask's voice was still a whisper, but it was hard—hard as iron.

"Wait a minute, now."

"I wait no longer." The whisper was cold—cold as steel.

The man in the cloak moved down upon the two. The metal mask leered its frozen grin, and there was neither human mirth nor human emotion in its set and steely features.

"Give me that casket."

Drake reached for his revolver.

"Stand back," he warned. "I don't know what you mean by all this, but if you come a step further I'll blast a hole through you."

A chuckle burbled from beneath the immovable iron lips.

"You forget I am immortal."

"Stand back!"

But Iron Mask came on. His great arms reached forward—and Drake fired. Drake saw the bullet strike the black cloak and rip through the cloth covering the shoulder. But Iron Mask was immortal, and he loomed closer—

DRAKE fired again. This time the bullet tore through the cloth above the chest, and Drake saw the shreds part to reveal a patch of skin—of *silver* skin!

A dry, rattling laugh came from the throat of Iron Mask. "You see?" he whispered. "Yes, you see, but don't understand, do you? Then—*look, you fool!*"

Gloved hands raked out awkwardly, sweeping the top of the cloak from Iron Mask's head and revealing his entire skull. It was bare now, rising in a great, silvery dome. And Drake saw that this creature had no iron mask—its entire head was iron!

Drake was stunned into immobility. Chuckling, the creature drew the concealing gloves from gleaming metal hands—hands that now ripped off the black cloak and the garments beneath it.

Iron Mask stood stripped and revealed for what he was; an entity whose head and body were constructed entirely of burnished, deathless metal!

"Robot!" Drake gasped.

Roselle's shriek and Iron Mask's rattling chuckle mingled in mocking reply.

Drake watched the metal monster as it lunged toward him. He fired blindly, wildly; saw the bullets ricochet from the body of the iron robot. He knew then that there was no hope, no solution.

Then the robot was upon him, and its great shaft-like metal arms embraced him. He felt the cold chill of its iron embrace, it crushed him close and squeezed. The world was turning red, spinning madly—

Drake lifted his revolver, brought it down on the robot's shoulders. The chuckling horror bent him back. Agony lanced up Drake's spine. The creature bent its iron head—

Drake struck, then. His eyes focussed on the gleaming expanse of exposed iron skull. And he brought the butt of his revolver down with crushing force on the back of the robot's head.

The blow could not shatter iron—but there was a sudden splintering crash, and the revolver-butt bit deeply into a gaping hole in the ruined cranium.

A whistling scream rose from iron lips and the robot tottered back on its heels. Arms fell, releasing Drake.

He stepped back just in time. With a crash, the robot dropped to the cavern floor. Iron limbs writhed in a last, delirious spasm. Carefully-fashioned jointures were strained and wrenched as though in death-agony as arms and legs twisted convulsively.

And then the ruined head rolled back, and from the opening poured a thin, yellowish ichor.

Drake stooped and peered into the depths of the shattered metal skull. He poked the muzzle of his revolver inside, then stepped back just in time.

A shower of tiny cogs and wires emerged in a writhing tangle, accompanied by the acrid smoke of a miniature explosion.

There was no further movement from the metal body on the floor after that.

Drake stooped and picked up the casket, then joined the sobbing girl.

"Dry your eyes," he said, brusquely. "It's all over now."

"Yes—but—"

"The Nazis are wiped out, the casket is safe, and now the Underground's greatest menace has been removed." Drake's gray eyes stared sombrely at the figure on the cavern floor, but his lips held a tight grin.

"So it's the end," he half-whispered. "The real end of a living legend—the Man in the Iron Mask is no more."

7. *The Final Irony*

FOR a long moment, Drake stood staring down at the gleaming silver body of the robot; then Roselle was in his arms and he was comforting her, whispering.

The girl's eyes never left the twisted, inhuman frame of metal that had walked the earth in the guise of man. The cleverly articulated limbs of the metal monster looked oddly grotesque now—Roselle could recall the Iron Mask's clumsy movements.

Here was the explanation, together with the reason for his imperviousness to bullets, and great strength.

But there were many other matters not explained. Roselle turned to Drake, and her lips framed questions.

"When did I first suspect?" Drake answered. "Probably at the very start. You fired at his head and the bullet struck. Even a wounded soldier with a steel faceplate would be injured by a bullet. Besides—did you notice he never slept or ate?

"Then, too, the matter of the casket bothered me. Why was he so anxious to find it and keep it on his person? Obviously because it contained something of vital importance—perhaps a clue as to his real identity.

"Even when we heard the story of the Man in the Iron Mask, my suspicions were not allayed. Granting that his story was true, and he was immortal—I still couldn't swallow this business about his being a savior of France.

"It didn't ring true. A savior of France would not counsel Napoleon to conquer. A savior of France would not restore the Empire. A savior of France would certainly be active during World War I.

"Right then and there I reasoned that, immortal or not, he was an enemy. An enemy to watch. And he betrayed us—you see that now, don't you?"

"Yes," said Roselle, slowly. "I think I do."

"He was after the casket from the start," Drake told her. "That's why he attacked you. He wanted to get the casket and the information it contained, before either the Underground or the Nazis would lay hands on it.

"So he took it from you and made off with it. He ran into the Gestapo squad on the road, and there was nothing to do but fight. Although he was working for the Nazis, he didn't want them to discover his secret, either. So he fought them. And I helped him.

"Then, when we came to headquarters, he left to secure information before the meeting. Obviously, he had an easy way of securing that information—he merely went to Hassman and asked for it. At the same time he led Hassman back to attack the Underground meeting.

"He meant to wipe us out, but when I got the casket in the darkness he followed me when we escaped. Then we told him

there was news coming from Paris regarding future Underground activities.

"That's when he fed us the story about his immortality. He wanted us to believe him. And he wanted us to keep alive until we got the news from Paris. Then we could die, when the information was in his hands.

"Naturally, he selected our new headquarters under the *gauleiter's* offices. Not alone because it was a clever idea from our point of view, but also because he could lead Hassman to us at any time.

"He almost succeeded, but not quite. What he didn't know is that I took advantage of our headquarters to do a little spying on my own.

"When I went out to meet the Underground emissary from Paris, he tipped off Hassman. The whole force went out to wait for me and the Paris Underground agent. They planned to seize us as we met.

"But I didn't go to the rendezvous. Instead, I went upstairs, to Hassman's office. I searched through his papers and found —the truth about the Man in the Iron Mask! Who he was and what he was doing!

"I learned then and there that he was a spy of Germany, and an important one.

"Then I opened the casket and read the papers within. One of them was what he was looking for.

"You remember him telling us that the Bastille record of the Man in the Iron Mask was missing? Well, that paper is in the casket. No wonder he wanted it—and didn't want either the French or Germans to find it! For it told the rest of his story, and in it I read the secret of how to destroy him."

ROSELLE shook her head. "I still don't understand," she said. "Just who and what was he? Who created him and what was he doing?"

Drake grinned.

"I'll be brief. After putting two and two together—piecing together his story, the papers in Hassman's office, and the Bastille registry, I can tell you this:

"He was a robot, created by Roger Bacon, in the 13th century. The Bastille record says 1287, but we can't be sure."

"Roger Bacon? The English monk?"

"Exactly. He was an alchemist who dabbled in science and what was then called sorcery—though if he created this marvelous mechanism, he was no sorceror but a genuine savant. There is an old legend about a 'Brazen Head' Bacon made, which could prophecy the future. I never gave the story credit for having any significance—but now I can see. Roger Bacon didn't create a 'Brazen Head' at all; he made this robot. By alchemic means he endowed it with perpetual life, and human intelligence.

"He fashioned it during the years he was imprisoned for heresy—in France. Yes, the French put him in prison, and he languished there nourishing a hatred. A hatred for France.

"So he made the robot, as an instrument of vengeance. The robot was animated by a single purpose—not to save France, but to destroy it.

"That much we know, for the Bastille entry tells us so. What the robot's activities were after Bacon's death we can only surmise. It turned up almost four hundred years later at the court of Louis XIV.

"From that point on, the story roughly corresponds to what he told us when he claimed to be the Man in the Iron Mask. He did appear in court as a prophet and soothsayer, and the king's ministers did seek his advice. Louis XIV did order his imprisonment; but he didn't order that his prisoner wear an iron mask.

"He had always worn the iron mask—for it was his head! No wonder they hid him away in secret. He must have been clever even then, to keep them from finding out that he was an automaton, instead of a man wearing a mask. No one suspected, however.

"And even as a prisoner, no one sus-

pected his advice. He did give advice, but not advice to save France. He plotted her downfall. Historians agree that the actions of Louis XIV were directly responsible for the policies leading to the French Revolution 200 years later. And the robot dictated those policies!

"He escaped just as he said he did, and disappeared again. If he indeed betrayed Marie Antoinette he did so to further the disruption of the king. And if he advised Napoleon he did it maliciously, to injure France.

"When the Bastille fell he came there to find the place in the register where his secret was revealed. Someone—we will never know who it was—got there ahead of him and took the register leaf. He must have searched for it high and low; all we know is that it finally ended up here at Dubonne, buried away in an obscure file of old official papers.

"Now we come to the part of the story pieced together from Hassman's reports.

"The robot had not destroyed France by revolution, or by Napoleonic domination. And yet the deathless urge persisted. Friar Bacon's magic was strong, and although we will never understand why it worked, we can see how it worked.

"The robot was in Germany between 1860 and 1870. We do not know what story he used to account for his disguise—always the robot posed as a man in a mask. But we can guess that he wormed his way into high places. Probably he consulted and advised Bismarck himself. It is not too much to suppose that the robot's advice and cunning led to the Franco-Prussian war!

"Now there comes another gap in history. There is no record of the robot's activities in the following years. France was humbled but not destroyed. Perhaps cunning old Bismarck had imprisoned the robot, just as Louis XI did in the old days. Whatever happened, we know the robot had no connection with World War I that we know of—though it seems highly probable that he was at work, fighting against France. And he almost succeeded, then.

"But Hassman's papers do tell us one important thing—they record the meeting of the robot and Adolf Hitler."

Roselle drew back, startled.

"He met Hitler?" she gasped.

DRAKE smiled.

"Of course. That is obvious. Think for a moment. Haven't you heard all stories about Hitler consulting with fortune-tellers and soothsayers? Don't you realize all those are blind rumors to disguise the presence of a master plotter? Who but the robot would exercise the cunning and savage hatred necessary to plan the downfall of France?

"And when France fell, who but the robot would exact such a monstrous price? The robot hated France, animated by Roger Bacon's will. And now France had fallen, hence the price."

"What price?" asked the girl.

Drake leaned forward.

"The robot came here to rule France," he whispered.

"Rule?"

"Yes. Hassman's papers reveal that he was taking orders from the robot. That all *gauleiters* took their orders from him. The real *gauleiter* of France was our robot. That was its price for helping Hitler!"

Again the two humans stared at the twisted metal figure on the floor.

Drake shook his head. "Who knows where it might have ended?" he mused. "Luckily, the robot blundered. Discovering a clue as to the whereabouts of the papers explaining his true origin, the robot came here from Paris. Getting Gestapo information, including Underground passwords, was simple. Then he set out, double-crossing both the Germans and French, in an effort to secure that tell-tale Bastille entry. He fell in with us, and the rest is—history."

Roselle snuggled closer to Drake as they moved past the grisly, gleaming shape

on the ground and sought the outer entrance on the hillside.

"I still don't see how you destroyed the robot," the girl murmured. "I saw you strike the iron head, but it wasn't a severe blow."

"The Bastille register entry gave me the secret," said Drake. "It transcribed Roger Bacon's own words—probably discovered by some researcher who had suspected the truth and delved back into ancient chronicles of Bacon's time.

"Bacon hated France, but he was a great scientist and a just man at heart. He never realized what a horror he was unleashing on the world—but he must have suspected that some day the horror would have to be checked. So he wrote down a clue.

"*Achilles had a heel—and the iron chain of Tyranny hath always a weak link.* That's what Bacon wrote, and what I saw in the register.

"I never guessed the weakness in the Iron Mask until the robot confronted me with bared head. Then I knew that Bacon must have built it with a flaw. My eye caught a subtle difference in the jointures on top of its skull. Bacon had built it so that if need be it could be destroyed.

"When I struck that vital spot on the skull, the head was smashed. For although the Man in the Iron Mask really had an iron head—a narrow strip across the top of the skull was just plain, ordinary *tin!*"

Together, man and girl strode forward into the light streaming across the earth above.

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The Letters of Cold Fire

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

Heading by ELTON FAX

THE El had once curved around a corner and along this block of the narrow rough-paved street. Since it had been taken up, the tenements on either side seemed like dissipated old vagabonds, ready to collapse without the support of that scaffolding. Between two such buildings of time-dulled red brick sagged a third, its brickwork thickly coated with cheap yellow paint that might well be the only thing holding it together. The lower story was taken up by the dingiest of hand laundries,

Once in the school beneath the ground the scholar remains until he has been taught, or—goes away in the dark!

and a side door led to the lodgings above. Rowley Thorne addressed a shabby dull-eyed landlord in a language both of them knew: "Cavet Leslie is—" he began.

The landlord shook his head slowly. "Does not leave his bed."

"The doctor sees him?"

"Twice a day. Told me there was no hope, but Cavet Leslie won't go to a hospital."

"Thanks," and Thorne turned to the door. His big hand was on the knob, its fingertips hooked over the edge. He was a figure inordinately bulky but hard, like a barrel on legs. His head was bald, and his nose hooked, making him look like a wise, wicked eagle.

"Tell him," he requested, "that a friend was coming to see him."

"I never talk to him," said the landlord, and Thorne bowed, and left, closing the door behind him.

Outside the door, he listened. The landlord had gone back into his own dim quarters. Thorne at once tried the knob—the door opened, for in leaving he had taken off the night lock.

He stole through the windowless vestibule and mounted stairs so narrow that Thorne's shoulders touched both walls at once. The place had that old-clothes smell of New York's ancient slum houses. From such rookeries the Five Points and Dead Rabbits gangsters had issued to their joyous gang wars of old, hoodlums had thronged to the Draft Riots of 1863 and the protest against Macready's performance of Macbeth at the Astor Place Opera House . . . the hallway above was as narrow as the stairs, and darker, but Thorne knew the way to the door he sought. It opened readily, for its lock was long out of order.

It was more a cell than a room. The plaster, painted a dirt-disguising green, fell away in flakes. Filth and cobwebs clogged the one backward-looking window. The man on the shabby cot stirred, sighed and turned his thin fungus-white face toward the door. "Who's there?" he quavered wearily.

Rowley Thorne knelt quickly beside him, bending close like a bird of prey above a carcass. "You were Cavet Leslie," he said. "Try to remember."

A thin twig of a hand crept from under the ragged quilt. It rubbed over closed eyes. "Forbidden," croaked the man. "I'm forbidden to remember. I forget all but—but—" the voice trailed off, then finished with an effort:

"My lessons."

"You were Cavet Leslie. I am Rowley Thorne."

"Rowley Thorne!" The voice was stronger, quicker. "That name will be great in hell."

"It will be great on earth," pronounced Rowley Thorne earnestly. "I came to get your book. Give it to me, Leslie. It's worth both our lives, and more."

"Don't call me Leslie. I've forgotten Leslie—since—"

"Since you studied in the Deep School," Thorne finished for him. "I know. You have the book. It is given to all who finish the studies there."

"Few finish," moaned the man on the cot. "Many begin, few finish."

"The school is beneath ground," Thorne said, as if prompting him. "Remember."

"Yes, beneath ground. No light must come. It would destroy—what is taught. Once there, the scholar remains until he has been taught, or—goes away in the dark."

"The school book has letters of cold fire," prompted Thorne.

"Letters of cold fire," echoed the thin voice. "They may be read in the dark. Once a day—once a day—a trap opens, and a hand shaggy with dark hair thrusts in food. I finished—I was in that school for seven years—or a hundred!" He broke off, whimpering. Who can say how long?"

"Give me your book," insisted Thorne. "It is here somewhere."

THE man who would not be called Cavet Leslie rose on an elbow. It was a mighty effort for his fleshless body. He still held his eyes tight shut, but turned his face to Thorne's. "How do you know?"

"It's my business to know. I say certain spells—and certain voices whisper back. They cannot give me the wisdom I seek, but they say that it is in your book. Give me the book."

"Not even to you, Rowley Thorne. You

are of the kidney of the Deep School, but the book is only for those who study in buried darkness for years. For years—"

"The book!" said Thorne sharply. His big hand closed on the bony shoulder, his finger-ends probed knowingly for a nerve center. The man who had been in the Deep School wailed.

"You hurt me!"

"I came for the book. I'll have it."

"I'll call on spirits to protect me—*Tobkta—*"

What else he may have said was muddled into a moan as Thorne shifted his hand to clamp over the trembling mouth. He prisoned the skinny jaw as a hostler with a horse, and shoved Cavet Leslie's head down against the mattress. With his other thumb he pried up an eyelid. Convulsively the tormented one freed his mouth for a moment.

"Ooooooh!" he whined. "Don't make me see the light—not after so many years—"

"The book," said Thorne once more, "or I'll prop your eyelids open with toothpicks and let the light burn into your brain."

"Tobkta tarvaron—"

Thorne stopped the mouth as before, and again pried up a lid. When the gaunt figure still twitched, he pinned it with pressure of his weight.

"The book. If you'll give it up, hold up a finger."

A hand trembled, closed—all but the forefinger. Thorne released his grip.

"Where?"

"In the mattress—"

At once, and with all his strength, Thorne chopped down with the hard edge of his hand, full at the bobbing, trembling throat. It was like an axe on a knotted log. The man who had been Cavet Leslie writhed, gasped, and slackened abruptly. Thorne caught at a meager wrist, his fingers seeking the pulse. He stood silent for a minute, then nodded and smiled to himself.

"Finished," he muttered. "That throat-chop is better than a running noose."

He tumbled the body from the cot, felt quickly all over the mattress. His hand paused at a lump, tore at the ticking. He drew into view a book, not larger than a school speller. It was bound in some sort of dark untanned hide, on which grew rank, coarse hair, black as soot.

Thorne thrust it under his coat and went out.

JOHN THUNSTONE sat alone in his study. It was less of a study than a lounge—no fewer than three chairs were arranged on the floor, soft, well-hollowed chairs within easy reach of bookshelf, smoking stand and coffee table. There was a leather-covered couch as well. For Thunstone considered work of the brain to be as fatiguing as work of the body. He liked physical comfort when writing or researching.

Just now he sat in the most comfortable of the three chairs, facing a grate in which burned one of the few authentic fires of New York. He was taller than Rowley Thorne and quite as massive, perhaps even harder of body though not as tense. His face, with its broken nose and small, trim mustache, might have been that of a very savage and physical-minded man, except for the height of the well-combed cranium above it. That made his head the head of a thinker. His hands were so large that one looked twice to see that they were fine. His dark eyes could be brilliant, frank, enigmatic, narrow, or laughing as they willed.

Open on his lap lay a large gray book, with a backing of gilt-lettered red. He pondered a passage on the page open before him:

Having shuffled and cut the cards as here described, select one at random. Study the device upon it for such time as you count a slow twenty. Then fix your eyes on a point before you, and gaze unwinkingly and without moving until it seems that a closed door is before you, with upon its panel the device of the card you have chosen. Clarify the image in your mind, and keep it there until the door seems to swing open, and you feel that you can enter and see, hear or otherwise experience what may happen beyond that door. . . .

Similar, pondered John Thunstone, to the Chinese wizard-game of Yi King, as investigated and experimented upon by W. B. Seabrook. He was glad that he, and not someone less fitted for such studies, had happened upon the book and the strange cards in that Brooklyn junk-shop. Perhaps this was an anglicized form of the Yi King book—he said over in his mind the strange, archaic doggerel penned by some unknown hand on the fly-leaf:

This book is mine, with many more,
Of evilness and dismal lore.
That I may of the Devil know
And school myself to work him woe.
Such lore Saint Dunstan also read,
So that the Cross hath firmer stead.
My path with honor aye hath been—
No better is than that, I ween.

Who had written it? What had befallen him, that he sold his strange book in a second-hand store? Perhaps, if the spell would open a spirit-door, Thunstone would know.

He cut the cards on the stand beside him. The card he saw was stamped with a simple, colored drawing of a grotesque half-human figure, covered with spines, and flaunting bat-wings. Thunstone smiled slightly, sagged down in the chair. His eyes, narrowing, fixed themselves in the heart of the red flame. . . .

The illusion came sooner than he had thought. At first it was tiny, like the decorated lid of a cigar-box, then grew and grew in size and clarity—shutting out, it seemed, even the firelight into which Thunstone had stared. It seemed green and massive, and the bat-winged figure upon it glowed dully, as if it were a life-size inlay of mother of pearl. He fixed his attention upon it, found his eyes quartering the door-surface to seek the knob or latch. They saw it, something like a massive metal hook. After a moment, the door swung open, as if the weight of his gaze had pushed it inward.

He remembered what the book then directed: *Arise from your body and walk through the door.* But he felt no motion, physical or spiritual. For through the open door he saw only his study—the half of his study that was behind his back, reflected as in a mirror. No, for in a mirror left would become right. Here was the rearward part of the room exactly as he knew it.

And not empty!

A MOVING, stealthy blackness was there, flowing or creeping across the rug between a chair and a smoking-stand like an octopus on a sea-bottom.

Thunstone watched. It was not a cloud nor a shadow, but something solid if not clearly shaped. It came into plainer view, closer, at the very threshold of the envisioned door. There it began to rise, a towering lean manifestation of blackness—

It came to Thunstone's mind that, if the scene within the doorway was faithfully a reproduction of the room behind him, then he could see to it almost the exact point where his own chair was placed. In other words, if something dark and indistinct and stealthy was uncoiling itself there, the something was directly behind where he sat.

He did not move, did not even quicken his breath. The shape—it had a shape now, like a leafless tree with a narrow starved stem and moving tendril-like branches—aspired almost to the ceiling of the vision-room. The tendrils swayed, as if in a gentle wind, then writhed and drooped. Drooped toward the point where might be the head of a seated man—if such a thing were truly behind him, it was reaching toward his head.

Thunstone threw himself forward from the chair, straight at the vision-door. As he came well away from where he had sat, he whipped his big body straight and, cat-light despite his wrestler's bulk, spun around on

the balls of his feet. Of the many strange spells and charms he had read in years of strange study, one came to his lips, from the *Egyptian Secrets:*

"Stand still, in the name of heaven! Give neither fire nor flame nor punishment!"

He saw the black shadowy shape, tall behind his chair, its crowning tendrils dangling down in the very space which his body had occupied. The light of the sinking fire made indistinct its details and outlines, but for the instant it was solid. Thunstone knew better than to retreat a step before such a thing, but he was within arm's reach of a massive old desk. A quick clutch and heave opened a drawer, he thrust in his hand and closed it on a slender stick, no more than a roughcut billet of whitethorn. Lifting the bit of wood like a dagger, he moved toward the half-blurred intruder. He thrust outward with the pointed end of the whitethorn stick.

"I command, I compel in the name of—" began Thunstone.

The entity writhed. Its tendrils spread and hovered, so that it seemed for the moment like a gigantic scrawny arm, spreading its fingers to signal for mercy. Even as Thunstone glared and held out his whitethorn, the black outline lost its clarity, dissolving as ink dissolves in water. The darkness became gray, stirred together and shrank away toward the door. It seemed to filter between panel and jamb. The air grew clearer, and Thunstone wiped his face with the hand that did not hold the whitethorn.

He stooped and picked up the book that had spilled from his lap. He faced the fire. The door, if it had ever existed otherwise than in Thunstone's mind, had gone like the tendril-shape. Thunstone took a pipe from his smoking stand and put it in his mouth. His face was deadly pale, but the hand that struck a match was as steady as a bronze bracket.

Thunstone placed the book carefully on the desk. "Whoever you are who wrote the words," he said aloud, "and wherever you are at this moment—thank you for helping me to warn myself."

He moved around the study, peering at the rug on which that shadow image had reared itself, prodding the pile, even kneeling to sniff. He shook his head.

"No sign, no trace—yet for a moment it was real and potent enough—only one person I know has the wit and will to attack me like that—"

He straightened up.

"Rowley Thorne!"

Leaving the study, John Thunstone donned hat and coat. He descended through the lobby of his apartment house and stopped a taxi on the street outside.

"Take me to Eighty-eight Musgrave Lane, in Greenwich Village," he directed the driver.

THE little bookshop looked like a dingy cave. To enter it, Thunstone must go down steps from the sidewalk, past an almost obliterated sign that read: BOOKS—ALL KINDS. Below ground the cave-motif was emphasized. It was as though one entered a ragged grotto among most peculiar natural deposits of books—shelves and stands and tables, and heaps of them on the floor like outcroppings. A bright naked bulb hung at the end of a ceiling cord, but it seemed to shed light only in the outer room. No beam, apparently, could penetrate beyond a threshold at the rear; yet Thunstone had, as always, the non-visual sense of a greater book-cave there, wherein perhaps clumps of volumes hung somehow from the ceiling, like stalactites. . . .

"I thought you'd be here, Mr. Thunstone," came a genial snarl from a far corner, and the old proprietress stumped forward. She was heavy-set, shabby, white-haired, but had a proud beaked face, and eyes and teeth like a girl of twenty. "Professor Rhine and Joseph Dunninger can write the books and give the exhibitions of thought transference. I just sit here and practise it, with people whose minds can tune in to mine—like you, Mr. Thunstone. You came, I daresay, for a book."

"Suppose," said Thunstone, "that I wanted a copy of the *Necronomicon?*"

"Suppose," rejoined the old woman, "that I gave it to you?" She turned to a shelf, pulled several books out, and poked her withered hand into the recess behind. "Nobody else that I know would be able to look into the *Necronomicon* without getting into trouble. To anyone else the price would be prohibitive. To you, Mr. Thun—"

"Leave that book where it is!" he bade

her sharply. She glanced up with her bright youthful eyes, slid the volumes back into their place, and turned to wait for what he would say.

"I knew you had it," said Thunstone. "I wanted to be sure that you still had it. And that you would keep it."

"I'll keep it, unless you ever want it," promised the old woman.

"Does Rowley Thorne ever come here?"

"Thorne? The man like a burly old bald eagle? Not for months—he hasn't the money to pay the prices I'd ask him for even cheap reprints of Albertus Magnus."

"Good-by, Mrs. Harlan," said Thunstone. "You're very kind."

"So are you kind," said the old woman. "To me and to countless others. When you die, Mr. Thunstone, and may it be long ever from now, a whole generation will pray your soul into glory. Could I say something?"

"Please do." He paused in the act of going.

"Thorne came here once, to ask me a favor. It was about a poor sick man who lives—if you can call it living—in a tenement across town. His name was Cavet Leslie, and Thorne said he would authorize me to pay any price for a book Cavet Leslie had."

"Not the *Necronomicon?*" prompted Thunstone.

Her white head shook. "Thorne asked for the *Necronomicon* the day before, and I said I hadn't one to sell him—which was the truth. I had it in mind that he thought Cavet Leslie's book might be a substitute."

"The name of Leslie's book?"

She crinkled her face until it looked like a wise walnut. "He said it had no name. I was to say to Leslie, 'your schoolbook.' "

"Mmmm," hummed Thunstone, frowning. "What was the address?"

She wrote it on a bit of paper. Thunstone took it and smiled down.

"Good-by again, Mrs. Harlan. Some books *must* be kept in existence, I know, despite their danger. My sort of scholarship needs them. But you're the best and wisest person to keep them."

She stared after him for moments following his departure. A black cat came silently forth and rubbed its head against her.

"If I was really to do magic with these books," she told the animal, "I'd cut forty years off my age—and take John Thunstone clear away from that Countess Monteseco, who will never, never do him justice!"

THERE was not much to learn at the place where Cavet Leslie had kept his poor lodgings. The landlord could not understand English, and Thunstone had to try two other languages before he learned that Leslie had been ill, had been under treatment by a charity physician, and had died earlier that day, apparently from some sort of throttling spasm. For a dollar, Thunstone gained permission to visit the squalid death-chamber.

The body was gone, and Thunstone probed into every corner of the room. He found the ripped mattress, pulled away the flap of ticking and studied the rectangular recess among the wads of ancient padding. A book had been there. He touched the place—it had a strange chill. Then he turned quickly, gazing across the room.

Some sort of shape had been there, a shape that faded as he turned, but which left an impression. Thunstone whistled softly.

"Mrs. Harlan couldn't get the book," he decided. "Thorne came—and succeeded. Now, which way to Thorne?"

The street outside was dark. Thunstone stood for a moment in front of the dingy tenement, until he achieved again the sense of something watching, approaching. He turned again, and saw or sensed, the shrinking away of a stealthy shadow. He walked in that direction.

The sense of the presence departed, but he walked on in the same direction, until he had a feeling of aimlessness in the night. Then again he stood, with what unconcern he could make apparent, until there was a whisper in his consciousness of threat. Whirling, he followed it as before. Thus he traveled for several blocks, changing direction once. Whatever was spying upon him or seeking to ambush him, it was retreating toward a definite base of operations. . . . At length he was able to knock upon a certain door in a certain hotel.

Rowley Thorne opened to him, standing very calm and even triumphant in waistcoat and shirtsleeves.

"Come in, Thunstone," he said, in mock-

ing cordiality. "This is more than I had dared hope for."

"I was able to face and chase your hound-thing, whatever it is," Thunstone told him, entering. "It led me here."

"I knew that," nodded Thorne, his shaven head gleaming dully in the brown-seeming light of a single small desk lamp. "Won't you make yourself comfortable? You see," and he took up a shaggy-covered book from the arm of an easy chair, "I am impelled at last to accept the idea of a writing which, literally, tells one everything he needs to know."

"You killed Cavet Leslie for it, didn't you?" inquired Thunstone, and dropped his hat on the bed.

Thorne clicked his tongue. "That's bad luck for somebody, a hat on the bed. Cavet Leslie had outlived everything but a scrap of his physical self. Somewhere he's outliving that, for I take it that his experiences and studies have unfitted his soul for any conventional hereafter. But he left me a rather amusing legacy." And he dropped his eyes to the open book.

"I should be flattered that you concentrated first of all in immobilizing me," observed Thunstone, leaning his great shoulder against the door-jamb.

"Flattered? But surely not surprised. After all, you've hampered me again and again in reaping a harvest of—"

"Come off it, Thorne. You're not even honest as a worshipper of evil. You don't care whether you establish a cult of Satan or not."

Thorne pursed his hard lips. "I venture to say you're right. I'm not a zealot. Cavet Leslie was. He entered the Deep School—know about it?"

"I do," Thunstone told him. "Held in a cellar below a cellar—somewhere on this continent. I'll find it some day, and put an end to the curriculum."

"Leslie entered the Deep School," Thorne continued, "and finished all the study it had to offer. He finished himself as a being capable of happiness, too. He could not look at the light, or summon the strength to walk, or even sit. Probably death was a relief to him—though, not knowing what befell him after death, we cannot be certain. What I'm summing up to is that he endured that wretched life underground to get the gift of this text book. Now I have it, without undergoing so dreadful an ordeal. Don't reach out for it, Thunstone. You couldn't read it, anyway."

He held it forward, open. The pages showed dull and blank.

"They're written in letters of cold fire," reminded Thunstone. "Letters that show only in the dark."

"Shall we make it dark, then?"

THORNE switched off the lamp.

Thunstone, who had not stirred from his lounging stance at the door, was aware at once that the room was most completely sealed. Blackness was absolute in it. He could not even judge of dimension or direction. Thorne spoke again, from the midst of the choking gloom:

"Clever of you, staying beside the door. Do you want to try to leave?"

"It's no good running away from evil," Thunstone replied. "I didn't come to run away again."

"But try to open the door," Thorne almost begged, and Thunstone put out his hand to find the knob. There was no knob, and no door. Of a sudden, Thunstone was aware that he was not leaning against a door-jamb any more. There was no door-jamb, or other solidity, against which to lean.

"Don't you wish you knew where you were?" jeered Thorne. "I'm the only one who knows, for it's written here on the page for me to see—in letters of Cold Fire."

Thunstone took a stealthy step in the direction of the voice. When Thorne spoke again, he had evidently fallen back out of reach.

"Shall I describe the place for you, Thunstone? It's in the open somewhere. A faint breeze blows," and as he spoke, Thunstone felt the breeze, warm and feeble and foul as the breath of some disgusting little animal. "And around us are bushes and trees. They're part of a thick growth, but just here they are sparse. Because, not more than a dozen step away, is open country. I've brought you to the borderland of a most interesting place, Thunstone, merely by speaking of it."

Thunstone took another step. His feet were on loose earth, not on carpet. A peb-

ble turned and rattled under his shoe-sole.

"You're where you always wanted to be," he called to Thorne. "Where by saying a thing, you can make it so. But many things will need to be said before life suits you." He tried a third step, silently this time. "Who will believe?"

"Everybody will believe." Thorne was almost airy. "Once a fact is demonstrated, it is no longer wonderful. Hypnotism was called magic in its time, and became accepted science. So it is being achieved with thought-transference, by experimentation at Duke University and on radio programs in New York. So it will be when I tell of my writings, very full and very clear—but haven't we been too long in utter darkness?"

ON THE instant, Thunstone could see a little. Afterwards he tried to decide what color that light, or mock-light, actually was. Perhaps it was a lizardy green, but he was never sure. It revealed, ever so faintly, the leafless stunted growths about him, the bare dry-seeming ground from which they sprang, the clearing beyond them. He could not be sure of horizon or sky.

Something moved, not far off. Thorne, by the silhouette. Thunstone saw the flash of Thorne's eyes, as though they gave their own light.

"This country," Thorne said, "may be one of several places. Another dimension—do you believe in more dimensions than these? Or a spirit world of some kind. Or another age of the world we know. I brought you here, Thunstone, without acting or even speaking—only by reading in my book."

Thunstone carefully slid a hand inside his pocket. His forefinger touched something smooth, heavy, rectangular. He knew what it was—a lighter, given him on an occasion of happy gratitude by Sharon, the Countess Monteseco.

"Cold fire," Thorne was saying. "These letters and words are of a language known only in the Deep School—but the sight of them is enough to convey knowledge. Enough, also, to create and direct. This land is spacious enough, don't you think, to support other living creatures than ourselves?"

Thunstone made out blots of black gloom in the green gloom of the clearing—immense, gross blots, that moved slowly but knowingly toward the bushes. And somewhere behind him a great massive bulk made a dry crashing in the strange shrubbery.

"Are such things hungry?" mused Thorne. "They will be, if I make them so by a thought. Thunston, I think I've done enough to occupy you. Now I'm ready to leave you here, also by a thought—taking with me the book with letters of cold fire. You can't have that cold fire—"

"I have warm fire," said Thunstone, and threw himself.

It was a powerful lunge, unthinkably swift. Thunstone is, among other things, a trained athlete. His big body crashed against Thorne's, and the two of them grappled and went sprawling among the brittle twigs of one of the bushes. As Thorne fell, undermost, he flung up the hand that held the book, as if to put it out of Thunstone's reach. But Thunstone's hand shot out, too, and it held something—the lighter. A flick of his thumb, and flame sprang out, warm orange flame in a sudden spurting tongue that for a moment licked into the coarse shaggy hair of the untanned hide that bound the book.

Thorne howled, and dropped the thing. A moment later, he pulled loose and jumped up. Thunstone was up, too, moving to block Thorne off from the book. Flame grew and flurried behind him, into a paler light, as if burning something fat and rotten.

"It'll be ruined!" cried Thorne, and hurled himself low, like a blocker on the football field. An old footballer himself, Thunstone crouched, letting his hard knee-joint come in contact with Thorne's incharging bald skull. With a grunt, Thorne fell flat, rolled over and came erect again.

"Put out that fire, Thunstone!" he bawled. "You may destroy us both!"

"I'll chance that," Thunstone muttered, moving again to fence him off from the burning book.

Thorne returned to the struggle. One big hand made a talon of itself, snatching at Thunstone's face. Thunstone ducked beneath the hand, jammed his own shoulder up under the pit of the lifted arm, and heaved. Thorne staggered back, stumbled. He fell, and came to his hands and knees, waiting. His face, upturned to Thunstone,

was like a mask of horror carved to terrorize the worshippers in some temple of demons.

It was plain to see that face, for the fire of the book blazed up with a last ardent leap of radiance. Then it died. Thunstone, taking time to glance, saw only glowing charred fragments of leaves, and ground them with a quick thrust of his heel.

DARKNESS again, without even the green mock-light. Thunston felt no breeze, heard no noise of swaying bushes or stealthy, ponderous shape-movement—he could not even hear Thorne's breathing.

He took a step sidewise, groping. His hand found a desk-edge, then the standard of a small lamp. He found a switch and pressed it.

Again he was in Thorne's hotel room, and Thorne was groggily rising to his feet.

When Thorne had cleared his head by shaking it, Thunstone had taken a sheaf of papers from the desk and was glancing quickly through them.

"Suppose," he said, gently but loftily, "that we call the whole thing a little trick of imagination."

"If you call it that, you will be lying," Thorne said between set teeth on which blood was smeared.

"A lie told in a good cause is the whitest of lies . . . this writing would be a document of interest if it would convince."

"The book," muttered Thorne. "The book would convince. I whisked you to a land beyond imagination, with only a grain of the power that book held."

"What book?" inquired Thunstone. He looked around. "There's no book."

"You set it afire. It burned, in that place where we fought—its ashes remain, while we come back here because its power is gone."

Thunstone glanced down at the papers he had picked up. "Why talk of burning things? I wouldn't burn this set of notes for anything. It will attract other attentions than mine."

His eyes rose to fix Thorne's. "Well, you fought me again, Thorne. And I turned you back."

"He who fights and runs away—" Rowley Thorne found the strength to laugh. "You know the rest, Thunstone. You have to let me run away this time, and at our next fight I'll know better how to deal with you."

"You shan't run away," said Thunstone. He put a cigarette in his mouth and kindled it with the lighter he still held in his hand.

Thorne hooked his heavy thumbs in his vest. "You'll stop me? I think not. Because we're back in conventional lands, Thunstone.

"If you lay hands on me again, it'll be a fight to the death. We're both big and strong. You might kill me, but I'd see that you did. Then you'd be punished for murder. Perhaps executed." Thorne's pale, pointed tongue licked his hard lips. "Nobody would believe you if you tried to explain."

"No, nobody would believe," agreed Thunstone gently. "That's why I'm leaving you to do the explaining."

"I!" cried Thorne, and laughed again. "Explain what? To whom?"

"On the way here," said Thunstone, "I made a plan. In the lobby downstairs, I telephoned for someone to follow me—no, not the police. A doctor. This will be the doctor now."

A slim, gray-eyed man was coming in. Behind him moved two blocky, watchful attendants in white jackets. Silently Thunstone handed the doctor the papers that he had taken from the desk.

The doctor looked at the first page, then the second. His gray eyes brightened with professional interest. Finally he approached Thorne.

"Are you the gentleman Mr. Thunstone asked me to see?" he inquired. "You—yes, you look rather weary and overwrought. Perhaps a rest, with nothing to bother you—"

THORNE'S face writhed. "You! You dare to suggest!" He made a threatening gesture, but subsided as the two white-coated men moved toward him from either side. "You're insolent," he went on, more quietly. "I'm no more crazy than you are."

"Of course not," agreed the doctor. He looked at the notes again, grunted, folded the sheets and stowed them carefully in an inside pocket. Thunstone gave a little nod of general farewell, took his hat from the bed, and strolled carelessly out.

"Of course, you're not crazy," said the doctor again. "Only—tired. Now, if you'll answer a question or two—"

"What questions?" blazed Thorne.

"Well, is it true that you believe you can summon spirits and work miracles, merely by exerting your mind?"

Thorne's wrath exploded hysterically. "You'd soon see what I could do if I had that book!"

"What book?"

"Thunstone destroyed it—burned it—"

"Oh, please!" begged the doctor good-naturedly. "You're talking about John Thunstone, you know! There isn't any book, there never was a book. You need a rest, I tell you. Come along."

Thorne howled like a beast and clutched at his tormentor. The doctor moved smoothly out of reach.

"Bring him out to the car," said the doctor to the two men in white coats.

At once they slid in to close quarters, each clutching one of Thorne's arms. He snarled and struggled, but the men, with practised skill, clamped and twisted his wrists. Subdued, he walked out between them because he must.

THUNSTONE and the Countess Monteseco were having cocktails at their favorite rear table in a Forty-seventh Street restaurant. They were known and liked there, and not even a waiter would disturb them unless signalled for.

"Tell me," said the countess, "what sort of fantastic danger were you tackling last night?"

"I was in no danger," John Thunstone smiled.

"But I know you were. I went to the concert, and then the reception, but all the time I had the most overpowering sense of your struggle and peril. I was wearing the cross you gave me, and I held it in my hand and prayed for you—prayed hour after hour—"

"That," said Thunstone, "was why I was in no danger."

The pattern of our lives was somehow mysteriously linked and we chased each other through life like the arms of a windmill

Man in a Hurry

By ALAN NELSON

FOR twenty years I knew the pudgy little man with the thick lens glasses and bright tan shoes, and always when I saw him, he would be madly and urgently scurrying, as though constantly on his way to some appointment for which he was already late.

I knew him—yet we never spoke. When by chance we would meet in a busy place or on the street, our glances would look for a long moment for some invsible sign of mutual recognition. Then he would rush past and disappear into the crowd. But each time, I believed we would meet again. Possibly the next day. Perhaps in a year. Maybe not for five. And we always did.

Reading by BORIS DOLGOV.

For the pattern of our lives was somehow mysteriously linked, and involuntarily we chased each other through life—like the arms of a windmill—never overtaking one another, yet never losing the trail. I didn't even know his name.

The first time I ever saw him was from the window of the 7:43 bus on my way to work one morning almost twenty years ago. He was trotting down the sidewalk trying to beat the bus to the next stop. One hand was on his hat, and he wheeled his paunch ahead of him as though it weren't a part of his body at all, but had some separate existence of its own. I watched with a kind of dull detachment his frantic race, and when finally he boarded the bus, I remember his standing next to me, swaying on the strap, puffing and groaning like a man strung up on the torture rack, trying desperately to regain some hold on life.

I saw the performance repeated every day for eight months. It never varied. At exactly 7:51 we would pass Azalea Street. It was then I would catch sight of him, trotting a block ahead of the bus, his round posterior bouncing, his tan shoes flashing. Then as we overtook him, I could see the heaving of his chest, the wild roundness of thick lens glasses, the purple of his grim face, and the little legs churning like bicycle pedals. He never looked at the bus as it passed but focused his eyes almost directly downward. Then at the next stop, he would come pounding up, always the last passenger to get on.

For eight months I watched him in his contest and heard his round little body gasp next to me as the aftermath of his perpetual victory, but then my shift changed and I took a different bus and later when we moved, I lost track of the little fat fellow for two years.

One afternoon I was in a large department store wandering with frustration from counter to counter in a search for a birthday gift. As I turned suddenly from one of the displays, he was in front of me. We stood there face to face for several seconds. He had not changed—the same round eyes weirdly distorted by the thick lens, the roly-poly body, the tan shoes. He looked me full in the face. Not a twinkle of recognition crossed his countenance, yet I knew he knew me. Then in a flash he was past, dodging and darting through the sluggish crowd. Idly, I drifted in his direction, but he was going too fast for me, and in a moment he had wiggled his way out of sight far down the crowded aisle. A moment later I caught another glimpse of him as he stepped on the escalator. He waited a moment until the moving mechanism caught him and wafted him upward. Then impatient with his progress, he started climbing—climbing two escalator steps at a time—so that the double upward motion seemed to shoot him ceiling-wards at a tremendous pace, and he disappeared through the second floor like he had been shot there out of a cannon.

IT WAS three-thirty in the morning a year and a half later, and I had been driving for three hours and still had another two hundred miles to go. The road was wide and clear. There were no other cars on the road, and I had the accelerator down to the floorboard and the speedometer drifted lazily between eighty-three and ninety miles per hour. I saw the headlights slowly creeping up behind me through the rear view mirror. I knew it was a police car but I didn't care. It was too late to slow up. The car pulled closer and closer and I realized that I could not outdistance it. There was no siren or flashing red light, however, as it pulled alongside and hovered there. Both our motors roared in a deafening and thundering unison. Slowly, very slowly, I turned my head. The light from the dashboard in the car opposite crawled up and illuminated the face of the little fat man. He had his hat pulled down but the glare of the cowl lights made his thick lens look like two huge marbles. That's all I had time to see—the hat, the puffy cheeks, the two big marbles. He looked at me for a moment as the two

thundering autos hung there opposite each other. He did not smile. There was no recognition. But I knew he knew me. Then slowly he turned his head back to the road, and gradually his car forged ahead and the red tail light disappeared far down the highway.

Once he sat across the table from me in a Gene Comptons restaurant, shoveling big spoonfuls of veal stew and chunks of bread down, swallowing it unchewed, as though it were chocolate pudding. Then without a smile or nod he pushed his plate back and rushed out.

Once about a year later he sat opposite me at a writing desk at the St. Francis Hotel, writing furiously. He just couldn't seem to get the words down fast enough and the scratch and splatter of the steel pen could be heard across the room and his arm jerked convulsively. While he was licking the envelope he looked at me a moment then disappeared.

Two years later we bowled together in the Downtown Alleys. I was with a group of friends, but as usual the little man was alone, playing some kind of a contest with himself in the alley next to ours. He wasn't a very good bowler, and his form was terrible—he couldn't bend at the waist.

Instead, he squatted vertically, and when he let the ball go, he would practically sit on his bright tan shoes. Yet he bowled with a passion and frenzy such as I shall never forget. Without pause or hesitation, he would send the heavy balls skidding one after another down the shiny maple strip, until I thought the little fellow would topple over with exhaustion. Three times he almost killed the pin setter by crashing the ball into upright pins before the nervous boy at the far end could clamber back to his perch. He kept score but I doubt if he could see to the end of the alley with those thick glasses he wore. I caught his eye several times during the evening but there was no light of greeting in them. Almost before the last ball reached the pins, he was putting on his coat, and, breathing heavily, laid the correct change on the counter, then jogged up the stairs, and out into the night.

I bumped into my friend many times during the next few years—a fleeting glance and then he would be gone—but the last time I saw him was at Pacific Avenue and Van Ness Avenue.

Just previous to this last look at him, I had been walking past Grison's Steak House intending to cross Van Ness Avenue. I had my eye on the green go signal and I was moving along the sidewalk at a fast pace trying to make the curb before the light changed. There was another man also trying to make the light and somehow we had fallen in step together, stride for stride, both our eyes on the green go sign, both wondering if the signal would change before we reached the corner. He was a tall lanky fellow and the briefcase he carried flapped noisily against his legs.

There was an insistent clicking of leather heels on the pavement behind me and, half turning, I recognized the little fat man bounding along ten yards behind us.

I THOUGHT of speaking but I was too intent on making the go sign and so continued on. By this time the man at my side and I had reached Van Ness Avenue together and, still in step, were about to step off the curb.

"I beg your pardon," a voice called in back of me.

I stopped short and turned around. It was the little fat man motioning, as he tried to catch up to me. The tall man with the briefcase continued across the street. Then the bell clanged and the signals changed.

"Could you tell me the time?" the little round fellow asked breathlessly.

I was standing there on the curb, fishing for my watch when the delivery truck smashed into the stranger with the briefcase who was now halfway across. The driver of the truck, spinning down Van Ness at a fast clip, had just squeaked through the signals as they turned. It was no one's fault. It was inevitable, unavoidable. One quarter of a second one way or another would have allowed the man and truck to go their respective ways.

I stood there on the corner and watched and the whole thing was as clear and vivid as though it were happening in slow motion. No swerving, dodging or careening could have prevented that meeting. The man and truck were just suddenly there. They were there together as though each were attached to separate ends of some invisible giant rubber band, which now suddenly released, had snapped the two together. I knew he was to be killed even before the truck smashed and dragged his body half a block toward the bay.

And I also knew that except for freak of timing, I, too, would have been smashed and dragged that half block.

"Do you have the correct time?" the little fat fellow repeated. He acted as though he hadn't seen the accident. I looked at my watch.

"It's exactly 3:17," I said.

"Thanks," he replied, "thanks very much."

I was trying to think of something to say to the man—to thank him for hurrying after me and holding me on that corner with his silly question. I wanted to thank him for rushing down the street that last few seconds; for rushing through his meal at Comptons last year; for driving madly down the dark highway ten years ago—all so he could be on time to meet me on this corner and ask me the hour of the day.

"You got here just in time," I said.

"I hurried," he replied.

Then he turned and it seemed as though he strolled—leisurely—down Van Ness, as if his time were his own and he had a carefree hour to spend.

A Ghoul Is Hard to Convince!

So, he's just counted every word in this new WEIRD TALES. Although pages are fewer a change in type size gives you about the same number of words as before.

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Unpublished Story

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Somewhere nearby was the tomb of Alaric the Goth—with him buried the choicest loot of ancient Rome!

JOHN BURTON was correspondent, with the Eighth Army, for an American syndicate. His immediate host, who sat beside him in the jeep, was Captain Norris of the 15th Sappers—Engineers, to you—and the two men up front were Hickman or Ickam, depending on who pronounced it, and Ladd.

"Bli'me," muttered Hickham, as they hit a rock, teetered precariously above the gorge, and dropped back in the trail with a thud, "this is a 'ell of a plyce!"

So it was; but Corporal Ladd handled the jeep as though he were an Iowa farmer instead of being a Welsh miner from Gloucestershire. He was good. Burton wished devotedly he himself had not come along. Captain Norris sat loosely to the jolts as though on a polo-pony, his long south of England jaw set hard and his eye flinty. He was altogether too flinty, although affable enough, to suit John Burton.

The jeep was loaded with coils of rope and one thing and another. The Eighth Army, first into Europe proper, was sweeping up from the toe of Italy's boot and was

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

now well above the instep. Its job was to create a diversion in the south while Clark's army got a foothold up north at Salerno, but beret-topped Montgomery had already turned the diversion into a major campaign and was going places.

Last night a truck loaded with explosives had lost its way and gone over into a gorge. Hickham was the only one who jumped. Now the jeep had the job of locating the truck, rescuing or burying the other men, and exploding the dynamite and kindred stuff.

Why it had not exploded on going into the gorge was one of war's minor mysteries. Burton almost wished it had done so. This goat-track road was something terrific, and the jeep had some road-work explosives aboard also.

"Cheer up," said Norris, who had been a don at Cambridge before donning uniform. "No Nazi mines to think about on this road, at least; that's a comfort. And if any ME's come along they'll strafe Cosenza and not us, which is another comfort. Know where we are, Burton?"

"I know where we will be if Corporal Ladd's foot slips," said Burton.

"Mustn't slip. Hear that, corporal?" Norris said cheerfully.

"Very good, sir," Ladd rejoined stolidly. He had no sense of humor, apparently.

Behind them rose the dark, gray, ugly walls of Cosenza, capital of the province of the same name, and above it and them lifted the cluster of naked granite mountains known as the Sila, an enormous desolate upland. Like most Calabrian cities built for defense, Cosenza was erected above the confluence of two mountain torrents, the Crati and the Busento.

"This ravine we're now following," said Norris, "is that of the Busento, and we left the city by that bridge near the railroad station—the local name for it is the Bridge of Alaric. Does that suggest anything to you?"

"Only," said Burton, "that as the crow flies we're too close to Cosenza for comfort if any bombing or strafing takes place."

"Well, somewhere along this gorge one of the world's greatest treasures lies buried. Local tradition says it's where the two streams come together; more likely, it's up about where we're going. A treasure so great and so historic that if it were found it would put to shame even the biggest war-story your papers could ask for."

The two men in front looked up and down the countryside. So did Burton, with the same thought in mind, and voiced it.

"How did it ever get into this bleak, uninhabited, God-forsaken country?"

Norris laughed and abandoned his pedantic air and produced cigarettes.

"My dear Burton, this was one of the richest countries in the world, before Hannibal and his Carthaginians brought the mosquito-plague from Africa, and between malaria and earthquakes, Calabria became what it is today! Somewhere within a rifle-shot of us lies the tomb of Alaric, Alaric the Goth who sacked Rome and brought its historic treasures here, and fell ill and died."

"Here?" queried Burton. "I've heard about it, but didn't know this was the place. Didn't his army turn aside a river and make him a tomb, and kill everyone who knew about it, and then let the river in again?"

Norris nodded. "Precisely. This was the river. This was almost the exact spot. With him they buried the choicest loot of ancient Rome—the king's share."

"We're coming to the plyce, sir," spoke up Hickham. "I sye, corporal, you'd better bloody well watch out—a sharp turn it is and no mistyke!"

Norris smiled under mustache. The place where the lorry had gone over, not where Alaric had been buried fifteen hundred years ago.

"Has no one ever searched for the spot, Captain?" asked Burton.

"No. In this desert? It would take an army. Mussolini talked of doing it, but never did."

ACROSS the gorge, the rocky scarp rose sharp and steep, merging into the granite promontory on which stood Cosenza. On this side was a sweeping inward curve. Below was the brawling, rushing torrent of snow-water from the crests of the Apennines; its noise filled the air unceasingly. To descend to that torrent was possible, to fall would be fatal. Struggling brush masked the water-line; thorns and cactus studded the slopes. A few stunted ilex found footing, here and there lifted small pines. Hickham

pointed excitedly to a fresh scar part way down.

"Right 'ere it is, sir!"

The jeep crawled to a stop almost on the brink of the rocky slope. All got out and went to the edge, craning to see below.

"Nothing alive there," said the captain calmly. "At least, nothing moving. That dark spot in the brush must be the lory."

"Right-o," Hickham assented. "Gor! Wot a plyce!"

"Needs a wrecking crew," said Burton.

"Our job, old boy," Norris said. "The army has other fat to fry. Out with the ropes, lads, and we'll at it. Make fast to the jeep. Corporal, stay here and be ready to haul up."

He was going down first; he did not need to state the fact.

"Me, too," said Burton quietly. "The rock edge will cut your rope."

"Trust me, sir," said Corporal Ladd. "There's ways."

Burton did not want to think about the crushed and mangled things that had been men, which he would help retrieve. Instead, he stared down at the gorge and wondered. Within a rifle-shot of here, perhaps at this exact spot—why not, indeed? Those rugged Visigoths from the Danube had laid their beloved leader well away, at uncounted cost of lives and labor. Marching for Sicily and Africa, swollen with the loot of Rome and Italy, checked under the high walls of Cosenza as they marched down the Via Papilia, the great Roman road that pierced to the toe of the boot, they had left him secure with his share of the treasure.

IT WAS exciting to think about what modern scientific search might accomplish here. If bare-handed barbarians had turned this stream aside somewhere up its length, science could do it again.

"I've been thinking of it," said Captain Norris. The same thought, naturally, had come to them both. "A bit of engineering could do it, I fancy. Queer thing and not generally known, Alaric was a Christian. A rather decent sort in his way. He plundered Greece and spared Athens. He looted Rome and spared the sacred vessels of the churches."

"Rather understatement to call the Nazis Goths and Huns, isn't it?" said Burton. "They spare nothing."

"Not even the food of children," Norris said gravely, thoughtfully. He had children at home in England. Burton reverted to practical matters.

"Why didn't you bring a dozen men from the city who are used to this place?"

"Why do you think I'm on the job?" demanded the other. "Secret and urgent, my son. On that lorry are two boxes we must recover at all costs; parts for our radar instruments."

"Shouldn't have sent them aboard a truck filled with dynamite."

Norris shrugged. "Didn't explode, did it? Dynamite's safe. Well, *facile est descensus Avernus!* See you below."

Easy is the descent into hell—Burton got the tag-end of Latin and grinned. The Englishman started down, clutching the thick rope, presently supporting himself by it and checking himself. It was not so difficult after all.

"I thought it was funny—a captain coming to collect four crushed bodies!" Burton told himself. "Our allies move in a mysterious way their wonders to perform, but they do get there. This will be good for a story anyhow—your correspondent at the tomb of Alaric! He's down. Here I go."

He tossed away his cigarette and went over the edge, hoping that he did not look as scared as he felt.

Not so difficult? He changed his mind about that quickly enough when his arms began to tug out of their sockets and his feet went out from under him and he banged on the rocky slope full length; still, he hung on and kept going. It was an interminable way down and every foot a fight. When he did get down, it was astonishing how small the two men up above looked.

Norris caught and stayed him, and seemed glad of company. No wonder. One khaki-clad corpse lay among crushed brush and fallen rock; apparently the falling truck had come down on him. They passed on and looked away.

The big truck must have turned completely over in air; it had fallen right side up, crushing small trees and brush. It lay with its nose well out in the stream, having come down on some scattered boulders

that protruded from the water. The bows and hood were still in place and upright. Norris surveyed the huge tumbled boulders and jagged rocks, and shook his head.

"Three to account for. Will you take a look about?" he said. "I'll get out to the lorry and see what's what."

He plunged at it. Burton turned and searched the brush. He came upon a bundled-up figure, then another, both dead; that made three in all. He wandered back to the truck and shouted his report.

Norris appeared, standing on the half-submerged hood.

"The driver's here, apparently alive but badly knocked about. Call to Ladd, will you? Tell him to drop a stretcher and let down a couple of lines for it. If you'll bring the stretcher, like a good chap, I think we can manage him. Oh, yes—another line and a net for the boxes. They're not large, luckily."

Burton picked his way back to the foot of the rubble slope and sent up the word. A bundled-up stretcher was at once dropped. Retrieving it, Burton came back to the truck and splashed his way out to the front end, where he opened the stretcher.

"Ghastly job, what?" came the voice of Norris. "Stand by, now. I can get out with him; be ready to give us a hand and get him on the stretcher. Blankets here, thank the Lord. In a jiffy, now."

He appeared at last, holding a blanket-swathed figure, and stepped off. Burton caught him, and together they got the unconscious shape on the stretcher. It took a stiff bit of work. No Red Cross teaching here; there was nothing else for it than to do what they could do and trust the unfortunate man would live.

DESPITE the icy water underfoot, when they at length carried that stretcher ashore and got it to the slope, both men were dripping with sweat; it was hot as blazes here in the mountain gorge. These hills were renowned for their heat, even in October.

Light lines had been let down from above, three of them. To one was tied a luggage-net, and for the moment Norris ignored this.

He brought the other two to Burton.

"While I'm fetching those boxes, will you tie these to the stretcher? Wrap them well around him and make fast."

Thankful that the victim was unconscious and would doubtless remain so, Burton fell to work. He accomplished an efficient job of it. Norris returned with one of the boxes, then went for the second. They were not heavy nor large.

Boxes in the net, Norris called to the men above to haul away. He sat down, panting.

"Thank God the worst is over!" he said, and watched the net going up. "Y' know, we'll be here for a bit. Must send the jeep for an ambulance, I fancy. Then the bodies must go up. After that, set the detonator and lay the charge."

"I'm for a dip in the stream, cold or not," said Burton. The other laughed.

"Good chap! Take it; you've earned it. I'll see the stretcher up. No, shan't need any help, thanks; I've climbed a bit in the Alps and so forth. I can handle it, really."

Subconsciously, Burton tried to get the proper accent into that "really." There was quite a trick to it. He stood saying the word over to himself and mopped sweat from his eyes.

"Right-o!" came down word from Hickham. The net and boxes were up.

Now the two men above stood by to haul. Norris expertly knotted a line under his shoulders; Hickham hauled on him, Corporal Ladd on the stretcher. Norris guided the swaying stretcher and kept it from collision with the rocks as he scrambled upward.

Burton watched them tensely; he had quite forgotten all about the tomb of Alaric by this time. There were other things to think about. A sudden blast of unwonted profanity broke from Norris, a yell from the men above. From the city on the hill was bursting the quick bark of guns, and dark patches were blossoming against the sky.

"There they are!" exclaimed Norris. "Hope the flak keeps 'em off."

Silly to think they would bother lone figures in this ravine, with the whole city to shoot at, thought Burton; he forgot about the jeep perched up there like a sore thumb.

The men above hauled away, Norris kept advancing with the swinging stretcher and

its thickly swathed burden. They were halfway to the top—two-thirds of the way—when Burton first heard the strident thrum of plane engines, and looked again to the sky.

He saw them clearly—one low-wing plane well in the lead, three others following. At first he took them for Beaufighters, then noted the engines projecting forward of the nose, the big rounded greenhouse, the tall single fin and rudder mounted atop the fuselage. Messerschmitt 210 bombers—he had seen them in Sicily and Africa often enough. He caught his breath at sight of them; they were not high up, but low, almost at rooftop level above the city, swooping and strafing! The deep crunch of a bomb came clearly above the wild gunfire.

He dragged his gaze away, reluctantly. Norris was at the top, sending the stretcher over the edge while Hickham held him on the line. Corporal Ladd got it safely over, and Norris followed. The thrum of those Messerschmitt engines was suddenly deafening. Burton looked, to see them swooping, all four, into the gorge like eagles sighting prey. Queer little staccato bursts of gunfire came from them. Wild, frantic yells sounded up above—and, with a heart-leap, Burton knew they were strafing the jeep.

He made one leap and scrambled into shelter of jutting granite fragments.

"Damned trigger-happy Heinies!" he gulped, ashamed of his own panic. Then he saw something else—something dropping, shooting down, apparently straight at him.

One bomb struck the hillside far above, sending down a small avalanche of loose rock. But there was another—his eye caught it. Winging down and down, directly at him! His jaw fell in shocked amazement; then, scrambling, he flung himself face down and hugged the stones in a slow, interminable instant of deathly waiting.

A terrific concussion drowned everything, and was itself drowned in a second that shook the very earth and the solid granite and sent a vast burst of stones and water over the world. Burton felt, rather than knew, what had happened—that bomb had struck the fallen truck and set off the dynamite. Then everything went black.

The sunlight came back. Burton found himself moving about in a strangely easy fashion. He seemed unhurt, but he was certainly out of his head—probably from the concussion. He forgot himself and stared, incredulous.

The first thing he noticed was the water. It had been rolled back from the spot where the truck had lain. More, great waves of the water were still in the air; the drops were glittering in the sunlight. It was not falling. It was moving, indeed, but very slowly, as though that terrific blast had knocked out the force of gravitation itself.

Close to where the truck had lain—he remembered that dynamite always explodes downward—there was a huge chasm in the riverbed. At one end of this chasm, which seemed to have held loose rock and rubble, large blocks of stone were fitted together making a wall, but it had no opening. This lack of any opening was one of the things that puzzled him, later. He was quite positive about this.

"I sye, Bill! Here's them ruddy blokes back again!" said a voice. "And a Yank, too!"

He thought it was Hickham speaking, but it was not. It was a man in khaki at one side, and two others were coming to join him, all Britishers, Eighth Army Transport Corps, he saw. But this was not all. To his amazement, two other men were climbing up from the chasm; they must have come through some opening in that wall—but there was none. What men they were!

Tall, long-haired, clad in queer armor, they had a fiercely barbaric aspect. One of them spoke, and Burton found himself understanding the words, yet they were not English words. It was like looking at one of those Arabs in Tunis and comprehending his speech by his eyes and gestures and looks.

"What do you want here?" he demanded angrily. "Why have you disturbed me?"

"Who the devil are you?" blurted out the American. The tall man looked at him hard.

"Is the name of Alaric so soon forgotten in the place of his conquests and death?" he said, not without a slightly mournful intonation. "See what your abominable earth-shock flung in my face!"

He held out an object to Burton, who took it and looked at it stupidly, while the

three soldiers muttered comments. The object was a flat bit of metal, four inches long and half as wide, broken off at one end; a letter or two were chiseled into it.

Burton looked again at the water in the air, which actually overshadowed them yet fell not. It was falling, true, but only very slowly. Alaric! That wall without an opening, visible under the river-bed—and yet the river did not flow back into the chasm! Had that concussion abrogated every law of nature?

"No, not at all," said tall Alaric, as though Burton, in his bewildered amazement, had spoken aloud; but he had not. "No; there are farther laws of Nature of which you're just becoming aware. Time and space are relative; they scarcely exist, to us. I see you meant no harm by disturbing me."

"No," said Burton helplessly. "No harm. I guess I'm off my head." He turned and gave the three soldiers a glance. "Say, boys, is this real or am I imagining things?"

"That's what we'd like to know ourselves, sir," replied one of the three. His face was vaguely familiar. "Why didn't Captain Norris take us along when he took Ernie out of the blasted lorry?"

Us? Burton eyed him again, and now recognized him as one of the two dead soldiers he had found in the brush. His brain reeled. To steady himself he looked at the water curled high in air, fingery, like one of Hokusai's waves, as though clutching at nothing. It was closer, the sunlight struck through it, but it was not falling with appreciable motion.

The big hairy fellow with Alaric touched his master on the shoulder and laughed.

"They just haven't come around yet," said he, amused. "No harm in any of them, master. You remember how long it took me to wake up to reality, after I was killed and put into the tomb with you? They're like that."

"Those three, yes," said Alaric. "But not this one. There's a silver cord of light from him to his body—see it? He's not over on this side yet, and won't be till the cord is loosed." He gave Burton an intent stare. "Here, you! We can give those other men a hand, of course, but not you. Don't you know you've no business hanging around unless you're all through on the other side? Where would we be if a guard happened along?"

Burton shook his head. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "Those soldiers over there are dead, and—"

"Who's dead, myte?" called one of the three belligerently. "Don't you come any o' that stuff on us! We called to you and the cap'n, shouted our lungs out, we did, and you never so much as answered back!"

"Extr'ordinary, no end," said another. "Hanged if I know what to think!"

Alaric flung a bellowing laugh at them.

"I'll teach you what to think, quick enough! That's what I'm here for lads. Soldiers, aren't you? I was a soldier, too. Yes, I'll soon set you fellows straight."

The three eyed him uncertainly, distrustfully.

"We can see him and hear him, and him us," said one. "So can that Amurrican journalist chap. But Cap'n Norris couldn't not half. What to make of it I dunno."

"Well, I know wot to myke of it," another said. "Might be we're dead after all! Ernie wasn't dead. They took 'im up the slope, but not us. And we seen these blokes last night, after the bloody lorry went over."

"And very uncivil you were when I tried to make you understand things," said Alaric. "But never mind; I know how to handle barbarians. I'll give you the rights of it, now. Your friend Ernie was unconscious, but not what you'd call dead."

"Are you tryin' to tell us we're dead?" demanded one of the three skeptically.

"You're not, really," said Alaric. "Nor am I. We've come alive, if you want the exact truth. There's no such thing as death, lads. You've shed your old overcoats of flesh, like a snake shedding its skin or an oak-shoot its acorn seed, that's all."

JOHN BURTON listened to all this and it confused him; sounded like a Holy Joe at work, and he had never been very strong for religion. He frowned at the tall armored figure.

"Just who are you, anyhow?" he demanded.

"I've told you. I am Alaric, of the Amal family, friend. This is my slave Wulf."

Burton shook his head. He took a step or two and marveled at how lightly and easily he could move. He looked around at the high wave of glittering water in air, at the body of water poised above the chasm and the stone wall—poised, yet imperceptibly in motion.

Then he caught sight of something else, something that startled him inexpressibly.

"Look there!" he cried, pointing to it. "Among those rocks! That's me, lying over there—and yet I'm here!"

"So you are," Alaric rejoined, "though I fear you'll not stay. That yonder is your old fleshly shell. Just the outer skin off the onion, friend. I expect the explosion came near doing for you—frightened you out of your skin, as the saying goes," he added with a hearty laugh.

"See 'ere, it's nothing to joke about!" cried a soldier indignantly. Alaric looked up at him with a wide grin.

"It's the greatest joke on earth, lad, if you only realized it—as you soon will! You don't think we're a pack of sour-faced rascals over here, do you? I'll have the three of you and Wulf singing some rousing campaign snatches before long, take my word for it!

"We might even follow that army of yours and pick up a few of your friends; they'll be wandering around like you were last night, wondering what it's all about."

"But we can see! We could see Cap'n Norris! Why couldn't he see us?"

"Because you're not a solid any longer, lad. Your moleculer formation is changed, or atomic formation or whatever it is. It's taken me fifteen hundred years to get it into my skull and I don't pretend to understand it yet—"

Burton felt a drop of water on his hand—indeed, it went right through his hand! Startled, he glanced up. That overhanging wave of water was moving faster and faster. A cry of alarm broke from him.

"Look out! That water—it's coming down!"

"You just think it is," said Alaric calmly. "Can't possibly hurt us. You think it is and your thought makes it so . . . very simple . . ."

His voice faded and died out. The water heaved from all sides; the great wave came crashing down with a tremendous shock and spatter that knocked Burton off his feet, and again the sunlight died.

Someone was shaking his shoulder, helping him to get up. He accomplished it stiffly. The lightness was gone; he felt heavy and dull and weighted, as though made of lead. He looked into the face of Captain Norris who was aiding him; his head pained terribly.

"Take it easy," said Norris. "Here, have a cigarette; you got a nasty knock on the head, but all's well that ends well, eh?"

"That wave of water," began Burton confusedly. "It came down—"

"Aye, you got a soaking. Sit down and rest a bit. Plenty of help up above; another army car came along, luckily."

Burton blinked around in new incredulity. The rushing, roaring torrent was tumbling along as before; there was no chasm, there was no stone wall—there was not another soul in sight. Another soul? Well, those soldiers were not here, nor Alaric and his companion.

"They're getting the bodies up," said Norris. "Then we'll follow and you can get that head looked at. I'll lend a hand getting you up. How do you feel?"

"I'm not sure," said Burton. "Okay, I guess."

THAT night he was quartered with Captain Norris, who proved a kindly, sympathetic friend to a hurt man.

"You know, that crack made me see things," he said. "Maybe it was the concussion. I'd like to get your ideas about it."

"Fire away," said Norris. What with cigarettes and wine and a good dinner, the world was rosy.

Burton told in detail the queer thing that had happened. The Englishman smoked in silence, nodded now and then, regarded him thoughtfully to the end.

"Remarkable, Burton, really remarkable," he said quietly.

"You think I was temporarily crocked by the explosion, eh?"

"Something of the sort, I fancy. Interesting, all the same. Some points are absolutely fetching, upon my word! Like your comprehension of another language, the telepathic comprehension—you know, it's deep, very deep."

"But you think it was a hallucination."

"My dear chap, did I say that? No such word. That might be the superficial answer, I grant you, but—"

"Then see what you make of this."

Burton leaned forward and put an object into the other man's palm.

Norris regarded it; a startled look came into his eyes. He turned it over and over. He scraped it with his nail, then with the edge of a coin. He studied the flat bit of metal with silent concentration. At last he looked up.

"My good Lord! If this isn't gold, then—" He checked himself and eyed the metal again, and pointed to the marks chiseled in it. "See here! This is old Gothic, no two ways about it—these letters! *A* and *l* —the first two letters of the name Alaric!"

Burton smoked in silence, waiting.

"Where did you get it?" broke out the other.

"I told you. That's why I wanted to tell you the story first. What do you think this bit of metal is, aside from being gold, if it is gold?"

Captain Norris pulled himself together, as it were.

"Never mind what I think. I'd say offhand that this was part of a name-plate, perhaps fastened to something. A casket, perhaps, or a piece of armor, or anything."

"He said the explosion knocked it into his face."

"Y' know," Norris said more calmly, "the outstanding fact about this, in which there can scarcely be any error, is that the explosion of our lorry must have uncovered the tomb of Alaric. One would conclude that it blew the tomb into smithereens and landed this bit of the contents in your lap."

"It wasn't in my lap," Burton said. "It was in my hand when you brought me around."

Norris gave him a sharp glance.

"And further," Burton went on, "the stone wall I saw did not have a break in it."

"Hm!" said Norris. "This is a very tangible object, old chap. You yourself admit that you were in an—er—intangible and insubstantial shape. That drop of water, for example, went through your hand, not upon it. Alaric was, also, intangible. How then, could he have given you this bit of heavy metal? How could you have hung on to it?"

"Ask me another. I don't know," Burton replied. "But here it is. And here's another thing. Remember the unconscious hurt man you took up in the stretcher? One of those three soldiers referred to him as Ernie, and so did others.

"Right. Ernest Pengallon, a Cornishman—"

Norris checked his words with a jerk.

"My sanctified aunt!" he breathed. "Do you realize what—what—"

"What the implication is? Of course I do," said Burton. "I didn't know that man from Adam. You can say I might have found out his name in a dozen ways; well, I didn't. There's only one way I learned it. You might say I guessed it, but I didn't."

He fell silent. Captain Norris smoked and looked at nothing for a long, long while.

"The only logical conclusion," he said at last, as though reluctantly, "is thoroughly out of the question. It's impossible. It—why, dash it all, it's positively monstrous! It's like some miraculous thing!"

"You mean, because gravitation and the other laws of Nature were shattered?"

"No; that's the very point, Burton! Miracles don't shatter the laws of Nature at all; that's the whole concensus of religious and scientific opinion, these days. Look at Christ, who deliberately refused on every occasion to shatter the laws of Nature! Miracles take advantage of, or use, certain laws beyond Nature; supernatural. Like our radio, or like electricity. We know every step in the process, yet not one of us can explain what it is."

"I gather, then, that you think my experience was all fancy?"

"I'll tell you what I think about it, old chap; I can do that in two words."

"Yes?"

"I think," Norris said gravely, "that after the war, when we're free, I'd like to go back with you to that spot on the Busento River. What?"

Burton met the flinty but thoughtful eyes, warmed and quickened now as they regarded him. He put out his hand to that of Norris, and their fingers gripped.

"It's a deal," he said. "We'll do it."

FUNGI FROM YUGGOTH

Evening Star

I SAW it from that hidden, silent place
Where the old wood half shuts the meadow in.
It shone through all the sunset's glories—thin
At first, but with a slowly-brightening face.
Night came, and that lone beacon, amber-hued,
Beat on my sight as never it did of old;
The evening star, but grown a thousandfold
More haunting in this hush and solitude.

It traced strange pictures on the quivering air—
Half-memories that had always filled my eyes—
Vast towers and gardens; curious seas and skies
Of some dim life—I never could tell where.
But now I knew that through the cosmic dome
Those rays were calling from my far, lost home.

St. Toad's

"BEWARE St. Toad's cracked chimes!" I heard him scream
As I plunged into those mad lanes that wind
In labyrinths obscure and undefined
South of the river where old centuries dream.
He was a furtive figure, bent and ragged
And in a flash had staggered out of sight,
So still I burrowed onward in the night
Toward where more roof-lines rose, malign and jagged.

No guide-book told of what was lurking here—
But now I heard another old man shriek:
"Beware St. Toad's cracked chimes!" Aghast, I fled—
I paused, when a third greybeard croaked in fear:
"Beware St. Toad's cracked chimes!" Aghast, I fled—
Till suddenly that black spire loomed ahead.

Decorations by

THE Daemon said that he would take me home
To the pale, shadowy land I half-recalled
As a high place of stairs and terrace, walled
With marble balustrades that sky-winds comb,
While miles below a maze of dome on dome
And tower on tower beside a sea lies sprawled.
Once more, he told me, I would stand enthralled
On those old heights, and hear the far-off foam.

A group of sonnets by *H. P. Lovecraft*

The Well

FARMER Seth Atwood was past eighty when
He tried to sink that deep well by his door,
With only Eb to help him bore and bore.
We laughed, and hoped he'd soon be sane again.
And yet, instead, young Eb went crazy, too,
So that they shipped him to the county farm.
Seth bricked the well-mouth up as tight as glue—
Then hacked an artery in his gnarled left arm.

After the funeral we felt bound to get
Out to that well and rip the bricks away,
But all we saw were iron hand-holds set
Down a black hole deeper than we could say.
And yet we put the bricks back—for we found
The hole too deep for any line to sound.

The Window

THE house was old, with tangled wings outthrown,
Of which no one could ever half keep track,
And in a small room somewhat near the back
Was an odd window sealed with ancient stone.
There, in a dream-plagued childhood, quite alone
I used to go, where night reigned vague and black;
Parting the cobwebs with a curious lack
Of fear, and with a wonder each time grown.

One late day I brought the masons there
To find what view my dim forbears had shunned,
But as they pierced the stone, a rush of air
Burst from the alien voids that yawned beyond.
They fled—but I peered through and found unrolled
All the wild worlds of which my dreams had told.

HANNES BOK

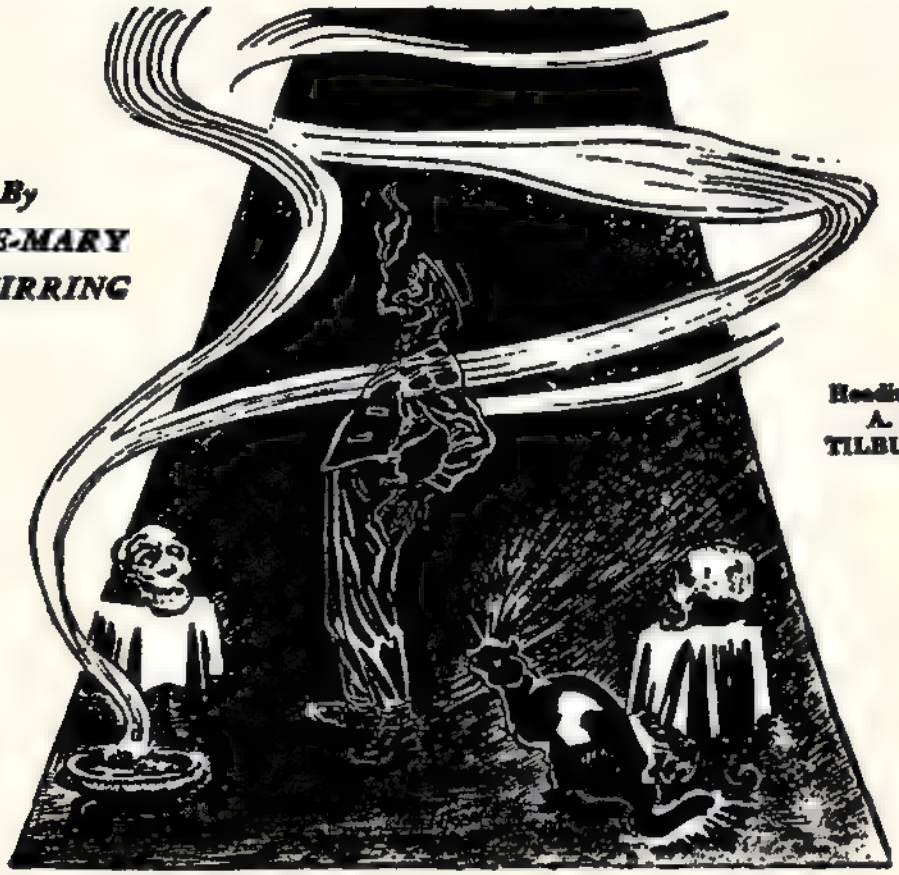
Homecoming

All this he promised, and through sunset's gate
He swept me, past the lapping lakes of flame,
And red-gold thrones of gods without a name
Who shriek in fear at some impending fate.
Then a black gulf with sea-sounds in the night:
"Here was your home," he mocked, "when you had sight!"

The Dear Departed

The seance was a fake, the medium a phony—but when you fool around with the occult anything can happen!

By
ALICE-MARY SCHNIRRING



Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

EXCEPT for the harsh, almost strangled breathing of the medium, the room was as nearly silent as any room with six people in it could be. The darkness was all-pervading; nearly intolerable. The air was not only stale and vitiated, but seemed to have a curious, unidentifiable smell: if the phenomenon known as gooseflesh had a smell, this would be it.

Suddenly the medium groaned. The groan was cut short, and followed by a piping, childlike voice, calling "Mommie! Mommie!" A woman cried out, with passionate love in her voice; half-rose from her seat, and was pulled back, though gently, by those who held either hand, into her place at the round table. "Dorrie—baby!" she sobbed. "Oh, my little darling!" There was a little sound, as if something soft falling on the table; then the little voice—far away, fainter—called, "Mommie, I'll come back."

In the pause that followed, briefly, nobody moved—then the woman tore loose her

hands and groped in the blackness on the table. The medium cried out, sharply, "The contact! The contact is broken!" and the other sitters broke out in a babble of expostulation. Someone turned on the light, and they turned to the woman; some curious, some angry. But she was indifferent to them all. Although her face was streaked with tears, a light overspread it, as she clutched to her heart a little ragged, soiled stuffed elephant.

"It was Dorrie's!" she whispered, looking at the medium. "She always took it to bed with her—and when she—she—("passed over," supplied the medium, gravely and tenderly) we couldn't find it. And now—now—"

"Now," answered the medium, "she has brought it back to you, to show you that she is happy and well. The next time she comes, she will tell you that she has no need of earthly toys. She is happier now than she has ever been—than she would ever have been upon earth. Surely, that makes your loss easier to bear, Mrs. Harcourt?"

"Oh, it does—it does!" she breathed. "Oh, Radha Ramavi, I am so grateful to you! I can never, never repay you!"

"I am only the vessel," he replied, with a grave smile. "Yet I, too, am grateful that you have been helped. I fear, however," and he turned to the rest, with a deprecating gesture, "that there is no use going further today. I am sorry. Tomorrow, however, we can try again."

He clapped his hands twice, sharply, and a door swung silently open. Through it entered a small man in Eastern garments, who bowed to the room in general, and then stood back expectantly, waiting to usher them out. One by one they filed out, each stopping to ask Radha Ramavi in tones that ran from the hopeful to the fiercely intense, if he thought there would be a Message for them tomorrow? To each, he replied with the same aloof and impersonal kindness, promising nothing, implying everything.

When the last was gone, the small man reentered the room, noiseless on the thick carpet. For a moment they looked at one another without speaking, then the small man sank into a chair, hitched up his flowing robes, and pulled a cigar from the pocket of the trousers which he wore underneath them. He bit off the end, spat, and put the unlighted cigar in his mouth.

"The Harcourt dame slipped me an envelope just before she went out," he said.

"Did you open it?" asked Radha Ramavi lazily.

"Certainly I opened it," the small man said, grinning. "One hundred bucks. We must not profane the Master by offering it to him in person, of course."

"I hope she will profane me with a hell of a lot more than that before we're through," Radha Ramavi commented. "I thought the elephant was good for a little more than a hundred."

"Oh, it will be, in the long run," said the small man, judicially. "Even with the cut to the kid's nurse, I figure you should make at least a grand, in the end."

"I imagine," agreed Radha Ramavi. He began to unwind his turban, revealing, with the removal of its last fold, a face that looked surprisingly like any face to be seen on Broadway and Forty-second Street, particularly with the addition of a cigarette worn pendant from the corner of the mouth. "What do you say we go out and eat?"

"Okay—I'm starved. Wait'll I get the horse-blanket off, Joe, and I'm with you."

JOE, since he was already wearing Western clothes—clothes which provided a piquant contrast to the turban when he wore the turban, but which looked like any other fashionable suit with the addition of the derby he now took from a concealed closet—had no need to change. The small man wasted no time in removing his gaudy draperies, disclosing more conventional trousers, shirt and vest beneath them. From the same closet he took his coat, slipped it on, and automatically pulled out a book of matches.

"Don't light that stinking stogie in here, Mark!" Joe warned him, "The last time you did, it took me twenty-four hours to air the place out. It seems to hang in the curtains. And a hell of a note it would be to try and explain why Radha Ramavi sits around smoking rank cigars."

Mark shook out the match he had already lighted. "Okay, okay. Why couldn't you say that one of the dear departed was a cigar fiend?"

"Oh, dear, no!" Joe's tone was mock-horrified. "The word fiend wouldn't go down well at *all* with my clientele!"

Out in the street by now, they both whooped with laughter. "Who's on the slate for tomorrow?" inquired Mark.

"Same bunch," Joe informed him. "Not bad, hey?" One sitting for the price of two. That was quite a stroke of luck, Mrs. Harcourt breaking the contact. Very important thing, contact. The right *kind of contact.*"

"Yeah—the kind that steers the suckers to you in the first place. What's the star attraction for tomorrow? More of the kid?"

"No—she'll keep on ice for at least three days. We'll give one of the other cash customers a break tomorrow. Old Royce ought to be good for a pay-off if we can produce either his son or his wife. What've you got on them?"

"Well, let's see." The small man was ruminatively silent for half a block. "The old lady isn't so easy, unless you want to settle just for the voice. She called him 'Henry', which anybody could know, no pet-name, so that's not very convincing. But the boy—we could even run a materialization on him. There's an Air Force uniform in the props. The picture was in the paper—I have it in the files—and his nickname was Roly. That do?"

"Fine. But listen, Mark—no materialization if that heavy-set guy with the big feet is there tomorrow—what's his name? Henderson. There's something about those feet that whispers 'copper' to me—and a little echo that says something about plain clothes. Have you got any more on him?"

"Not another damn thing," said Mark, with forceful disgust. "Just what he told me himself—his wife, Edna, died last year, and Mrs. Stens, the mousy little widow we turned up her husband for her, she told him how wonderful Radha Ramavi was. I never much trusted that Mrs. Stens, either, come to think of it. She disappeared too quick after hubby materialized. It wasn't such a good picture of him I was working from, and I sort of wonder—"

"I sort of wonder, too," said Joe, grimly. "Okay, then—only Mrs. Royce, if Henderson is there. Unless they can *prove* you're a ventriloquist, they won't have a thing to work on. No props, no nothing."

Mark laughed. "I don't know any way they *can* prove it," he said. "It doesn't show on me, does it?"

They were standing at the corner of Sixth Avenue by now, waiting for the light to change. Just as the little red cross flicked out and the green one on, Mark said, "Look—I'm gonner throw a scarce into that guy." It was a colored truckdriver, alone, who had just thrown his big machine into gear.

There was a rending crash, a high, thin shriek that pulsed on the ear for minutes after it had actually ended in a little bubble of sound, and almost immediately, the noise of running feet, the skirling of a police whistle, and the babble of many voices. The colored man, his face an unpleasant gray, was protesting to the officer, "Ah don' *know,* boss—all Ah knows is that a voice spoke right in ma ear, an' say, 'Black boy, debbil's waitin' fo' you!' Ah jus' had the truck in gear, an' Ah was so scared Ah took mah foot offen the pedal, an' the ol' truck jus' give one big jump, like, an' went up on the sidewalk here. Ah can't he'p it, boss—that's the Gawd's truth Ah tell you."

Beside the still form under the reddening coat that had been mercifully thrown over it, a cigar still sent up diminishing spirals of smoke.

* * * * *

IT was half-past two before Joe awoke from the heavy sleep that a quart of rye had at last induced. Even in the moment of awakening, he remembered: even in his sleep, he had not quite escaped. His sleep, indeed, had been like that coat—concealing the ultimate horror, yet disclosing glimpses that were almost worse. It was not only the thought of what Mark's loss would mean to him professionally—though that, too, would have to be faced in a minute—but he had had a feeling for Mark that was at least as deep as affection; the affection a man has for a mongrel who worships him, and asks no more than a bone and a pat—or a kick, if that be the God's will.

"Mark would have died for me," he suddenly said, out loud, almost in surprise. "Mark would have——"

He stood up, walked uncertainly to the dresser, and poured himself a straight rye. His hand shook, but he only spilled a couple of drops. When he had drunk that, and

followed it with another, he felt a little better physically.

Suddenly his nerves screamed, as the three melodious notes of the door-chime echoed through the silent rooms. He spoke aloud again, unconsciously. "My God — the suckers!"

He had meant to put them off; now it was too late. Around and around his mind raced, in a channel which hopelessness dug deeper and deeper. There was nothing for it. He darted into the seance room, picked up his turban from the table, and unsteadily wound it around his head, his fingers trembling with weakness and haste. He rubbed his eyes, dragging his hand heavily across his face, let out a shivering breath, and straightened his body. Slowly, he went to the outer door and opened it.

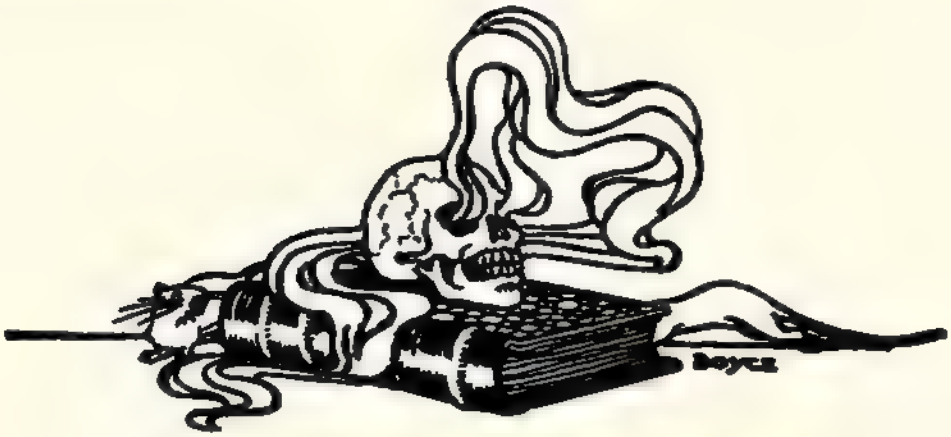
Somehow he greeted them all in his usual manner—or nearly so. He said nothing about Mark. When you're in a jam, never explain, his mind kept saying, monotonously; when you're in a jam, never explain, never explain, never explain. Somehow he got them all seated—Royce, Mrs. Harcourt, Henderson, and the other two. At the moment, he couldn't even think clearly who they were. Never explain, never explain. What could he do without Mark, he thought, his mind suddenly clear. Nobody to help with the cheesecloth, the trumpet, the flowers—Henderson (he was almost sure about Henderson, now) on the lookout for just something like that, anyway; what could he do alone? With a feeling as of a cool river flowing over him, relief came. Why—nothing, of course! There had been sittings before when nothing happened. The spirits weren't in the mood. (Never explain —never explain.)

After the first five minutes, they were a little restless. Joe's head ached intolerably, and the seconds dragged by with agonizing slowness. How long would it be before he could put an end to it? He longed, wretchedly, for Mark, his eyes closed and his lips moving silently as he said the name over and over, drugging himself with it.

Suddenly he stiffened in his chair. To his nostrils came the raw smell of a cigar—a cheap cigar. With a definite effort of will, he kept his eyes closed, but even through their lids he could detect a growing illumination. Now, now, he told himself desperately, now he must stand up, say that the seance is over for the day. But before he could act on it, a woman's scream rang terribly through the room; a man's voice said, "Oh, God! Oh, God!" very low; and a little sigh and a relaxing of the grip on his right hand told him that Mrs. Harcourt had fainted.

Slowly, with a feeling of inevitability, he opened his eyes.

"You wanted me, Joe, so I came," Mark said, through the mangled and bloody opening that had been his mouth.



The Day the World Stood Still

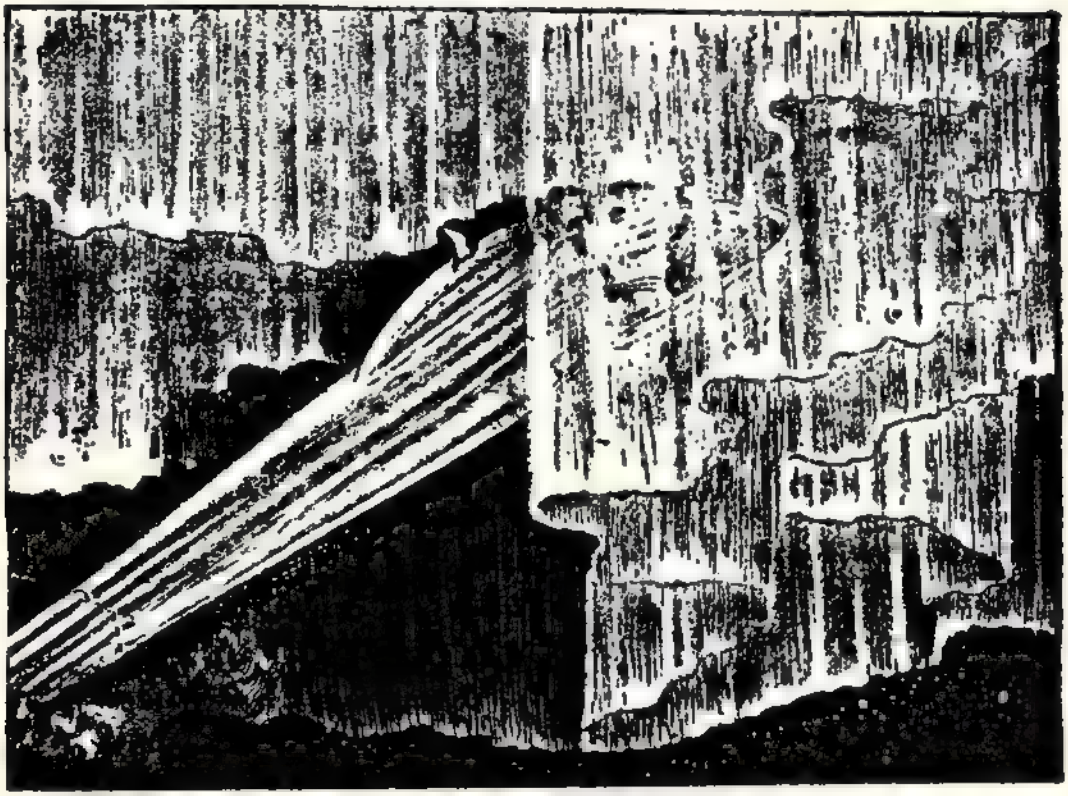
DR. ELDEN HOLCOMBE sat at his desk, his fingers together characteristically looking idly out over the city. His Ninety-fifth floor office faced north and the setting sun reflected crisp Fall brightness against the buildings in his view. A musical note drew his eyes back to an indicator-light set over his desk. A voice from the annunciator at one side said:

"Dr. Holcombe. Mr. Wrightson wants to see you immediately."

"Have him come right in."

Holcombe was chief physicist of the National Research Foundation. Jim Wrightson, his assistant, was a brilliant engineer

By ALLISON V. HARDING



Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

with that valuable quality so often lacking in men of his profession—an imagination.

The panel door at the end of the office slid noiselessly open and a dark-haired young man came hurriedly in.

"Hello, Jim," said the research chief rising.

Wrightson advanced until he was face to face with his superior. Thirty years younger than Holcombe and a head taller, his youthful face was troubled.

"Dr. Holcombe," he said. "I've just heard that another of Express Airways new Strato-speedliners has disappeared."

The older man turned away from his assistant and walked to a huge North Polar projection of the world covering one wall. His thin, clever hands placed pins in a section of the map over the western regions of the United States.

"I presume the speedliner was somewhere in here," Holcombe spoke over his shoulder.

"Yes. She left Chicago all right and was due on the Coast in a couple of hours. She's never showed up. I tell you, Dr. Holcombe, there's something strange going on. That's the third one of these new speed planes to disappear without trace! . Things like this just don't happen in 1955!"

"Assuredly there is something strange, Jim." Holcombe walked back to his desk. "I expect I'll be getting a call from Albert Forth any minute."

Does a strange, unthinkable malady threaten our world, our place in the universe—our very existence?

Wrightson stormed at the window.

"I don't know what you're supposed to do. After all, we're not in the aviation business—"

The illuminator on Holcombe's desk flashed and a secretary's voice said, "Dr. Holcombe, Mr. Forth of Express Airways is here and asks to see you right away."

"All right, let him come in."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No, no, Jim. I certainly don't."

THE entry panel rolled aside and a large, almost plump man rumbled into the room, his face florid, his hands tight on a black bowler.

"Well, Mr. Holcombe, I suppose you've heard the news?" Then, looking at Jim, "This one of your assistants?"

"Jim Wrightson, Mr. Forth. Yes, I heard the news. It's shocking."

"Shocking!" said Forth lowering himself into one of the comfortable leather chairs set about the room, "That's hardly the word for it. Three hundred people gone like that. Phoof!" Forth snapped his fingers. His agitation was evident. "I don't know what to do."

"Have you a schedule of the exact running time?" said Dr. Holcombe, "And show us on the map the precise course your speedliners take on this flight."

Forth bounced to his feet with the energy of a dynamic, perturbed, and puzzled human. He rustled some papers in his pocket and brought forth one, handing it to Holcombe. Crossing to the map he indicated the course between Chicago and the Coast.

"And somewhere in there," he rumbled, "the third of my new speedliners has disappeared."

"Rather close to home this time," remarked Wrightson. "The other two were, well, let's see, one was somewhere over Africa and the other in the Far East, if I remember correctly."

Forth indicated the two other spots on the map, and Holcombe set small colored pins at the spots the Airways executive pointed to. Forth came back to his chair near the doctor's desk. He leaned forward and pounded his hand on its flat top.

"You've got to do something," he glared.

Holcombe faced him.

"What do you expect us to do, Mr. Forth? You've taken up these matters with the proper authorities. Where do we come in?"

Forth, for all his bluster, was not a man without intuitive cleverness and common sense. He quieted his voice. Only his huge hands gripping the sides of the leather chair betrayed his emotions.

"Dr. Holcombe and Mr. Wrightson. You gentlemen know that my jet-propulsion Strato-speedliners have revolutionized world travel. They have reached the greatest speed mankind has so far attained. As of this year, as of 1955, they are without peer. You know the world investment my airline represents. And now three of these planes, all three, mind you, on their first flights, disappear!

"When one vanished, well, I thought despite all our foolproof equipment, it had sunk somewhere into the vastness of Africa. I reasoned in a like manner over the second vanishing act, the one in the Far East. It seemed plausible that the Pacific Ocean could have swallowed up a plane without trace, or at least it seemed more plausible than anything else we could think up. As you probably know, investigation has turned up nothing on either of these mishaps. On this third flight today I had a premonition of evil, and now my most dire anticipations have been realized. I have no faith in conventional investigations by so-called 'competent officials' because, Dr. Holcombe, I believe we are faced with something that is not conventional."

Holcombe inclined his head.

Wrightson spoke from the other side of the doctor's desk.

"What do you mean by 'not conventional,' Mr. Forth?"

"I don't know," the executive spread his hands wide. "If I knew—" he smiled. "Is it conceivable, Gentlemen, that my airline is the victim of some colossal and incomprehensible type of international piracy?" Forth's face darkened angrily. "You know, my firm does control most of the vital air routes of our globe. Maybe I'm the victim of some unspeakable intrigue!"

Holcombe shook his head. "I don't think so, Mr. Forth. Now perhaps if you'd said

interplanetary piracy," and he smiled at Wrightson.

"Don't be absurd," roared Forth. "You mean that 'Men from Mars' stuff? That's silly. It made nice reading back in the 1940's but it's too absurd."

Holcombe said nothing. Forth finally rose.

"Well, Dr. Holcombe, I'd appreciate any cooperation that you can give me, any lead at all."

Holcombe put one hand on the large man's shoulder.

"Rest assured that I'd like to get at the bottom of this thing."

"By the way," said the heavy man, "you weren't serious about the interplanetary piracy stuff? All that's absurd?"

Holcombe smiled as the door slid open.

"That was just a rather weak joke of Wrightson's and mine. However, Mr. Forth, remember one thing. Nothing is absurd."

THE next few days the papers and telecasters were filled with news of the third speedliner disappearance. High above the city Dr. Holcombe painstakingly assembled and evaluated every known detail of the three flights. Forth and Express Airways officials supplied data as to the exact weight, speed, direction, and etc., of the planes. The findings, or rather the lack of findings, of exploratory parties and investigations were obtained from the authorities involved.

A week after the happening, Wrightson entered Holcombe's 95th floor office one evening. The brilliant physicist was bowed over minute figures and equations. Not wanting to disturb his superior, Wrightson stood in the window and looked out over the city.

Things had changed so even in the last decade. He remembered ten years ago when he was still in college. Then planes that flew 400 miles an hour were considered speedy. Compared with today, air travel then was in its infancy.

Far below he could see the crowded streets and avenues of the great metropolis. People and vehicles hurried homeward.

"Good Lord!"

Dr. Holcombe's voice from behind him startled the young engineer out of his revery. Wrightson turned. The research head was staring past him out the window, his eyes bright, and on his face a look of shocked puzzlement.

"What is it, Doctor? Have you found anything?"

Holcombe's eyes snapped to his assistant's face.

"Oh, Jim, I hardly heard you come in. I've—well, I don't know. Let's just say that an idea has come to me. I have no really definite proof and it's so outré, so outlandish that I don't even want to talk about it as yet."

"Oh, tell me, Doctor," said Wrightson eagerly. "If you've discovered a trace of interplanetary piracy in all those reports you've got there, let me in on it." He grinned mischievously.

But Holcombe was very serious. "No, Jim, I've got to do some more work on this thing." He snapped his fingers. "I've got it! I know what we'll do next." He reached for the phone on his desk, pushing a button feverishly. "I want Mr. Forth at Express Airways."

Wrightson watched the older man's eyes nervously draw imaginary lines across the ceiling as he waited. After a moment the connection was made.

"Hello Forth. Holcombe. When is your next speedliner scheduled?"

"Umhum." Holcombe wrote rapidly on a pad. "Yes. Well, now, I tell you what I want you to do if you will. I think it may possibly lead to something that'll help us." Holcombe's voice went on and Wrightson listened fascinatedly.

Ten days later one of Express Airways' new deluxe Strato-speedliners was ready to leave for the West. Its eight rocket tubes gleamed as it crouched like some live thing at the edge of the runway. On the other side of the field was its exact counterpart, another speedliner. It was toward the second one that Forth, Wrightson, staggering under the weight of a bulky package, and Holcombe headed.

"This is all very irregular," Forth was saying. "You know these machines are expensive to operate just for two special guests."

Holcombe waved him aside. "You wanted us to follow every lead, Forth."

Forth nodded. "Yes, but I still don't like upsetting our time schedules."

Forth stood in the opening of the plane as Holcombe and Wrightson stepped into the roomy interior of the huge liner. They were the only passengers, the other occupants being crew members. The companionway door slammed shut and one of the uniformed officers showed the two to a forward observation point in the plane. It was a small independent compartment and Holcombe quickly shut the door, locking it.

"Now, Jim," he said, "let's set that thing up."

Wrightson busied himself with the bundle, the paper falling away, revealing a large high-powered mobile telescope.

"I still don't get it," said the young engineer with a puzzled frown.

"You will . . . in time," reassured the physicist.

Dexterously, Wrightson set up the tripod in front of the forward glass looking out over the nose of the ship and Holcombe fitted the immense portable telescope in its place. He trained it around much in the manner of one with a machine-gun.

"Fine," he said. "We're all set. Jim, watch the other Strato-speedliner and tell me when she leaves."

Wrightson moved to a side window and peered out. Holcombe was at the plane's communication system.

"Hello," he tried. A voice answered him.

"You know the instructions down there?"

The voice yessed.

"When I give the signal, then take off after the other speedliner as per orders."

"Dr. Holcombe, they're moving," Wrightson called from the other side of the compartment.

HOLCOMBE crossed to his assistant's side. The other speedliner was taxiing toward them across the runway. As it flashed by, their own plane shudderingly rumbled in a half-circle and gunned down the field. Holcombe rubbed his hands together satisfied.

"I wish you'd tell me some more about what's going on, Doctor," said Wrightson. "This is all very mysterious. You've mystified me almost as much as Forth."

Holcombe turned toward him.

"I'll tell you this much, Jim. I've given orders to the pilot of that other plane, through Forth of course, not to exceed nine hundred miles an hour until we're several minutes out. We're going to tag along behind. We've got a break on the day. It's clear, and with this telescope, we'll be able to hang behind a ways, and it's just possible we may be able to spot what happens, if anything's going to, and I'm rather afraid it is."

"Well, that was an enigmatic statement," breathed Wrightson. "You're not letting me in on very much," he complained. "What do you suspect? What's going to happen? What are we looking for?"

"Truthfully Jim, I don't precisely know. This may be a wild shot in the dark. You know, it's not my nature to make statements without substantial fact behind them, young man."

Wrightson subsided at that with a mumbled apology, and the two stood at the port windows watching ahead. A thin layer of cirrus clouds lay between the two planes and the earth now, but the air up here was crystal clear. They were in the sub-stratosphere. Holcombe put his eye to the telescope, training it experimentally at different points in the horizon.

The two Strato-speedliners were flying within half a mile of each other. Holcombe looked at his watch, placed a pad with figures on it and several charts on a window ledge. The doctor spoke over the intra-plane system.

"Close up on them now, pilot."

Their plane spurted and the distance between the two liners lessened.

"All right, that does it," cried Holcombe when but a quarter of a mile separated the two flying leviathans.

He walked limberly over to his telescope, set it exactly, and then back to the phone.

"Signal them to move ahead. Now pilot, check your instructions and listen to me very carefully. Take this plane up to 975 m.p.h. Not one bit more, mind you!"

Holcombe's instructions were okayed from below and the doctor turned back to the center of the compartment, glueing his eye to the telescope.

"Jim."

"Yes, sir."

"You see the other Strato-speedliner is now moving ahead. I've given orders for them to travel at 990, then 995, and then their maximum speed of a thousand. We're moving at 975 and will fall slowly behind."

Jim nodded and noticed that the space between the two planes was widening just perceptibly. Some time passed and the first Stratoliner was now several miles away.

"Jim," Holcombe called. "Tell them below to call the Strato-speedliner. Have them go up to 995 now and be sure that we don't go above 975."

Wrightson communicated with the flight officer and was back at his superior's side.

"Could I take a look, sir?" said the young engineer.

"No, no, I don't think so, Jim."

Wrightson stepped to a window and peered ahead disappointedly.

The first Strato-speedliner was now invisible to the naked eye.

"Can you still see her?"

"Yes," said the doctor. "Jim, tell them to be sure to keep in constant radio contact with that plane. I want the radio officer to let me know the minute he notices anything irregular."

WRIGHTSON quickly complied with the doctor's wishes and then stood looking out into the white glaring vastness of the sky. At this level there was no up. There was no down. There was not even distance. Just a dazzling brightness and monotonous nothingness. Half-unconsciously, he scanned the sky for signs of some prehistoric monster which should, according to some of the romantically inclined newspaper commentators, appear at this time and snatch at the first or their own speedliner. Time passed and his eyes ached with watching.

"Still in sight?"

"Yes," answered Holcombe. "I can see them. Please ask if the radio communications have been going along without interruption. If they have, order the radio officer to tell them to go up to their maximum speed."

Wrightson busied himself at the communications box. Then he called to Holcombe that everything was okay.

"All right then. Tell them to go up to a thousand!"

WRIGHTSON gave the order and had turned from the phone and taken two steps toward the center of the compartment when Holcombe gasped. The lower part of his face beneath the flange of the telescope turned ashen.

"What is it?" Wrightson said, and as he spoke he became aware of whistling from the intra-plane phone he had just left. Holcombe himself left the telescope and crossed to the box.

"Hello. Yes, what is it?"

Wrightson could hear the excited staccato noises from the voices below. Holcombe turned away, his face grave as he spoke to his assistant.

"Radio communications with the other plane just broke off and they've completely disappeared from my telescope view. They didn't fade out, mind you. They snapped from my vision like, well, like a movie screen going blank. One minute I saw them clearly. The next they were non-existent!"

Wrightson was silent, trying to grasp the enormity of this thing.

"Where are we?" said Holcombe quickly.

Wrightson went to the charts. They were over northwest Canada.

Holcombe went back to his telescope and quickly swiveled it this way and that.

"It's no use," he muttered half to himself. "I'm afraid my hunch was more than what Mr. Forth would call an absurdity. Let's head back immediately."

When the speedliner landed several hours later Forth was waiting, his face lined with worry.

"It's disappeared, you know," his first words were shrill. "What happened to it? You were there, weren't you? What went wrong? Tell me, man." He grabbed Holcombe by the shoulder.

Holcombe shrugged away. "We watched the plane, Mr. Forth, until it disappeared."

"Disappeared!" Forth made an angry face. "Don't be foolish. That's utterly preposterous! Speedliners don't just disappear."

Holcombe shook his head. "We had a telescope on it all the time and I saw exactly what happened."

"What did happen?" bellowed Forth.

"I told you. Your speedliner—vanished."

"And you expect me to believe that? It's a plot I tell you. They're trying to put Express Airways out of business."

Holcombe drew himself up.

Forth hesitated. "I appreciate what you've done, Dr. Holcombe, but I guess I don't understand your report. Of course, we're having that area of Canada searched now for any trace of the plane. I expect it will be found and a logical explanation for its crash discovered."

"There was no crash, Mr. Forth," said Dr. Holcombe quietly.

"You're not hinting at interplanetary piracy!" Forth smirked weakly.

"No."

"Well then, what?"

"I've told you," Holcombe shrugged. "Your speedliner just evaporated into thin air."

"Forth scowled blackly. "Thank you, Dr. Holcombe. You've been a great help."

"Now man, quiet yourself," said the physicist. "I want you and several other officials to come to my office tomorrow. I will go into this more thoroughly and I think I may have a suggestion or so to make."

"Humph," said Forth. "I don't want any more cock and bull stories," and stamped off.

Wrightson looked after the Airways executive. "You know, none of this has been very clear. Our story really didn't seem very plausible to Mr. Forth."

"No, Jim, I admit that, but just remember that because the truth is preposterous, unbelievable, even impossible . . . it doesn't stop being the truth!"

THE next day Dr. Holcombe faced a group of influential officials in the conference room of the National Research Foundation. By this time, reports of yesterday's air mishap had filtered in and had been scanned carefully. A commissioner of Federal police prefaced Dr. Holcombe's words by stating that he had received reports that no trace had been found of the missing speedliner. Holcombe described what had happened from his vantage point in the trailing plane. Forth shook his head angrily.

"You must have missed something, Doctor," he said.

Holcombe's lips set tightly. The other men, travel officials and several Federal authorities talked among themselves. James Garret, Coordinator of Transportation, finally spoke.

"At this stage, Gentlemen, I can sum up our meeting in the following way. We are all aware of a deplorable, a highly mysterious chain of circumstances; the disappearance of four of the new Strato-speedliners and yet none of us has a definite clue. The papers and the public are clamoring for results and so far," he shrugged hopelessly, "we don't even know where to begin."

Dr. Holcombe rose again and all eyes focused on him.

"I am going to make a suggestion. I cannot as yet fully explain the reasons for the disappearance of the liners, but I think if Mr. Forth will follow one simple instruction, we can at least for the time being discontinue any further disastrous happenings."

"And that is—?" spoke Forth from down the table.

"That you will limit the speed of your planes to 975 m.p.h.

There was a rumbling excitement from the gathering. Garret's voice was raised above the rest.

"What's that got to do with it, Dr. Holcombe?"

"Why it's preposterous!" said Forth. "I've built my airline company up on the reputation of having the very latest, the speediest of flying equipment. Why should we penalize ourselves?"

Several of the others nodded in agreement. Holcombe raised his hand for silence.

"You must do this thing, Forth, and Gentlemen, you must believe me. My recommendations are not as preposterous as you would think the reasons that necessitate them."

"What are those reasons?" demanded Garret.

"I cannot tell you. I ask you to trust me. To accept this recommendation. Let us at least try it. What does an infinitesimal decrease in flying speed mean? A few minutes difference, a few hours difference—balanced against that may possibly lie the solution to our problem."

Holcombe's listeners sat in impressed si-

lence for a moment as the doctor walked quietly out of the room. Then one by one they followed his example leaving the conference chamber.

Several hours later Wrightson and Holcombe were poring over their maps and charts when Forth called to say that he would accede with the physicist's wishes.

"Good," said Holcombe, "and I don't think your next speedliner will disappear."

The days rolled into weeks and the weeks became filled with crispness and snow as winter drew on. Express Airways had continued its speedliner schedule without mishap since Dr. Holcombe's mysterious advice had been acted upon. There had been no new word from Forth. It was characteristic of the man that when all was well he would refrain from getting in touch with Holcombe and certainly not congratulate him on the efficacy of his plan. No satisfactory explanation had been found for the earlier disappearance of the Express Airways' planes but the public, always ready to forget, had gone on to other interests and the authorities had been glad to let so refractory an affair slide.

Then came a memorable blue-white day not long before Christmas. As it pleased him to do, Holcombe was sitting at his desk gazing out of the window over the city. Wrightson sat near him. The two had been quiet for some time now when one of the communication buttons on Holcombe's desk buzzed urgently.

"Yes," said the doctor. "Oh. Put him on."

There was a slight pause, then "Hello, Mr. Forth, how is—? WHAT! And you are positive that your pilot did not exceed the speed limit we set? Yes. All right. Wrightson and I will be over."

Holcombe turned to his assistant, a worried look on his face.

"It's another one, Jim. Let's get over to Forth's office. Bring our charts on the earlier disappearances."

IN THE chambers of Express Airways, Albert Forth was ranting like one possessed. His expensive suit was wrinkled, and his face reddened and swollen by emotion. Garret and several uniformed officials were already with him when Holcombe and Wrightson arrived.

"When did this happen?" asked Holcombe. "What were the exact circumstances?"

Forth shook his head. Obviously the man was almost beyond words. He pressed a button on his desk and gave a few orders, however, and a few moments later a flight officer appeared with some papers. These Forth handed on to Holcombe who scanned them briefly and turned them over to Jim Wrightson.

"Well," sneered Forth when he could control himself. "What have you got to say to this?"

His red-rimmed eyes accused Holcombe. The spry doctor inclined his graying head.

"It's most unfortunate!"

"It's piracy! That's what it is," said Forth. "I want something done."

One of the Federal officials dressed in the uniform of Skyway Police spoke up.

"I can reveal to you, Mr. Forth, and Gentlemen, that since the second mishap of an Express Airlines plane, we have redoubled our patrols. I don't know what more could be done."

Garret said, "It's like some incredible magician's act, these—these disappearances. Tons of airplane with freight and passengers can't just vanish without a trace. At any other time, I would be the first one to brand as insane any thought of unearthly or extraplanetary forces but is it possible that such things are at work?"

No one answered. Holcombe shot a meaningful glance at Wrightson and the latter spoke:

"I think, Gentlemen, Dr. Holcombe and myself would like to study these papers you have given us."

HOLCOMBE already was leading the way to the entrance. The two sped back to the Research Foundation where the doctor feverishly busied himself at his desk. For hours the physicist worked, Jim not daring to interrupt him. The day grew dim outside, its light sinking away into the West. The city threw up its millions of little lights on all sides as the purples of evening grew eventually into blackness. Still Dr. Holcombe worked on, his lips mumbling fig-

ures, his pencil busy, his desk cluttered with papers.

Somehow, Holcombe's tension communicated itself to Jim so that the young engineer without knowing the exact why or wherefore found himself pacing up and down the center of the room enviously. The time grew late and finally around midnight Holcombe finished some figures and then looked up.

"Jim," he said softly.

"Yes."

"Remember back to the last great war, did you ever wonder how man could bring down such horrible destruction upon himself?"

"Why sure. I guess nearly everybody thought those things."

"Recall the tremendous tonnages of explosives used in 1944 and 1945? We were concerned with everything regarding those explosives except their ultimate effect on the future of mankind."

"I don't think I get it."

"Come here and look at these figures, Jim."

Wrightson drew up a chair at the physicist's side. Holcombe started to talk, his pencil pointing at figures and equations. The young engineer's face grew serious with interest and he leaned eagerly forward. Time passed as the two figures sat there. Behind them out the great window, one by one the lights of the city blinked out until they were seemingly alone, unearthly in their lofty office perch—two men attempting to grasp the most monstrous proposition that had ever faced the human race!

AS SOON as possible the next day, Holcombe, not visibly showing the effects of his all-night vigil, arranged a meeting of Federal, transportation, and scientific officials As the two waited for those summoned to arrive, Wrightson nervously drummed on the table in front of him. His collar was rumpled, and more than the older man, he showed the effects of the night before. His face was drawn and his eyes kept wandering to the huge map of the world on the wall. A world that had suddenly become very precious to him—and very much in danger!

When those authorities invited had assembled, Holcombe rose. Wrightson had wondered how the doctor would present his startling news. He suddenly felt a surge of deep admiration and effection for the man. Holcombe had said he would come directly to the point.

"Thank you all for coming here so promptly," said the research head. "What I'm about to say will be the strangest thing any of you gentlemen have ever heard. However, believe me when I say I am convinced of its truthfulness."

Several of his listeners shuffled impatiently.

"I can now tell you what has become of those speedliners."

AT THAT the faces in front of him showed eager surprise. Every glance was bent attentively toward him. Holcombe took a breath.

"Those Strato-speedliners have broken through, if I may use commonplace terms, the restrictions of speed and space imposed by this dimension we call our world. Just exactly in what plane of existence those liners now find themselves, I do not know. I *do* know that they have passed out of our sphere of life."

There were astonished gasps from the audience. Holcombe went on. He raised his hands in caution.

"Not one word of this must leak out to the public or to the press. The implications of this matter are too tremendous. We cannot yet see the final results nor can we anticipate the end of it."

There was silence for a moment and then a white-haired gentleman from the Federal Air Bureau spoke up.

"Is it your opinion, Dr. Holcombe, that the rate of speed that Mr. Forth's Strato-speedliners have attained has caused them to burst out of our dimension?"

"Roughly, yes."

"Then I have a valid point in rebuttal."

Holcombe inclined his head.

"I admit that Mr. Forth's planes have, to this date, provided the speediest method of transportation known to man. However, as long ago as the late 1940's airplanes were diving at rates of speed exceeding 900 and even 1,000 miles per hour!"

There was a chorus of yesses from the

audience and Holcombe looked at the papers in front of him.

"I can answer that very simply, and in fact here is where the greatest shock of our discovery comes. Beyond question that threshold of space and speed that separates this dimension from some other, we know not what, that threshold is drawing ever closer to us. In other words, Gentlemen, in the 1940's an astounding rate of speed might have been achieved, while several months ago 1,000 miles per hour was the limit, and now we find that limit, that level is shrinking. I am forced to suggest that all highspeed air travel be discontinued."

Forth pallored and banged his fist on the table.

"If this thing progresses, and I am sorry to say I expect it will, there is no telling what drastic steps we may have to take. Whether life is possible in that other dimension, life as we know it, that is something beyond our comprehension. As long as there are means of preventing these, er, strange accidents, we must prevent them. I hope my proposition has not seemed too dramatic. I hope it has not been overly incoherent. I assure you, Gentlemen, I am as much shocked by these conclusions as you must be. I have suspected something of this nature for some time, but the disappearance of the last Express Airline plane supplies a validity to our beliefs and an urgency to our actions."

JAMES GARRET questioned: "You mean, Dr. Holcombe, that as time passes speed must be curtailed increasingly to some not now clearly defined limit?"

"Precisely," said Holcombe. "Think of our little sphere of life as a room with movable walls and ceiling which may be pushed inward causing the chamber to shrink. In the scheme of things, in relation to the universe and eternity, our little dimension is shrinking."

"Can't anything be done?" said Forth. "What's the reason for all this?"

"I don't know that I am sure right now," said Holcombe.

"You seem to be sure of everything else," fired back Forth.

"It would be a large step to curtail transportation speeds," suggested James Garret.

"And what would we say to the public?" said Forth.

"I am not qualified to answer those questions," said Holcombe. He looked at his watch.

Forth heaved himself up out of his chair. "I'll not curtail my airline travel any more."

Garret waggled his head in agreement.

One of the Skyway patrol commissioners frowned.

"There must be some explanation for all this of a reasonable nature. Is it possible that some recent type anti-aircraft gun is being used against these planes? Some world combine controlled by madmen?"

Wrightson stepped forward noticing how suddenly tired his superior looked.

"That will be all, Gentlemen. Dr. Holcombe is not a young man, you know, and I can assure you he has been working very hard on this problem."

HOLCOMBE sat down gratefully. Jim Wrightson saw the others out and returned to his chief.

"I wonder if I did the wise thing, Jim," speculated Holcombe. "I can understand how they feel. This idea we've developed is outlandish."

"But our data indicates it beyond any question," cried Jim. "Any scientist of ability, any physicist, or engineer would be able to grasp this thing, at least its implications and effect, if not its exact mechanics!"

Holcombe sat disconsolately for a while.

"I think I'll go along home, Jim," he said.

"All right, Doctor. You've earned a rest."

Outside, as Holcombe was about to enter his little streamlined car and head homeward, he was accosted by Forth who bustled up.

"About this theory of yours, Doctor," said the Airways executive clutching at the physicist's arm. "I'm not a scientist. I'm not a research expert. But the whole thing seems quite preposterous to me. This globe of ours has spun through the skies for centuries and nothing like this has ever happened before."

Holcombe smiled. "You're quite right there."

"What I mean is, I can't believe you're serious about this matter, and it would be

very bad if anything got nosed around about this theory. Deucedly bad—"

"For transportation?" suggested Holcombe wryly.

"Yes," exhaled Forth. "You can see yourself," he went on. "Nobody will want to go anywhere. All high-speed travel enterprises will be bankrupt. Oh, I know there have been several unfortunate and inexplainable accidents with my Strato-speedliners, but there must be some normal explanation."

"I will say this much, Mr. Forth. I meant what I said at our meeting this afternoon. I believe that at present no word of this phenomenon should get out to the public. I cannot guarantee to you how long I shall feel that way. If you refuse to curtail your high-speed transportation, there will be an increasing number of these occurrences, as you call them. The public will eventually realize something is going on and demand an explanation. I council you, Mr. Forth, to take my advice. Curtail your transportation flights now."

"Curtail? I will not do it," expostulated the Express Airways executive. "It's letting down the public. It's letting down my fellow worker, all for some Jules Verne idea of yours that hasn't one shred of proof."

Holcombe shook his head sadly.

"You know, Dr. Holcombe, I think you are mad," said Forth as the physicist was getting into his auto. "I think you're like those men I've read about who build arks in anticipation of another great flood. But you can't scare me, my good man."

Dr. Holcombe shut the door and then his face appeared for a minute at the window.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Forth, that you don't believe me. However, I think events to come will convince you. Good evening!"

EVENTS to come convinced Forth, convinced Garret, and convinced all those officials and authorities, Federal and private, who had scoffed at the first dire warnings of Elden Holcombe. Two more Strato-speedliners disappeared and there was a nation-wide, even a world-wide clamor. Forth finally issued a statement that the Strato-speedliners' schedule had been discontinued—"Owing to circumstances beyond the Company's control."

The most ominous thing was, Holcombe confided to Wrightson one afternoon as the two worked feverishly over methods of stopping the curtain of oblivion that seemed about to descend further and further upon this dimension, our world—the most ominous fact was that one or both of the Strato-speedliners had, from evidence culled from official reports, probably disappeared at speeds under 900 miles per hour.

"What it means, then," stated Wrightson, "is that this anomalous condition is progressing! It reminds me of Poe's 'Pit and the Pendulum' where the knife-sharp pendulum swings ever lower on its victim. Good God, Doctor! We and our world, all of us are potential victims!"

AS TIME passed, official Washington beat a trail to Elden Holcombe's offices in the National Research Foundation. These comings and goings were discreet, for although the Government was now acquainted with the rough outlines of the menace facing mankind, it was deemed important not to allow any part of this information to become public knowledge.

The press, some of whose most prominent leaders had been let in on the situation, explained away the gradual curtailment of air and overland high-speed travel by simply saying there was an alarming and increasing fuel shortage.

Although brave volunteers were always ready to test the narrowing horizons of our dimension, Holcombe, with the aid of the Federal Air Bureau, devised a system of self-propulsive projectiles which could be adjusted to various speeds. In this way, he was able to keep abreast of the exact rate of speed still permissible in our sphere.

By spring, 450 miles per hour was the absolute limit!

As Holcombe explained to the anxious Government heads, the pendulum cutting into our dimension did not swing lower at a precisely predictable rate. That it did swing ever lower as time passed though, was evident by a comparison of any one week's tests with any previous week's. The trend showed beyond a question. And there seemed to be a pattern to the thing. The rate of reduction from day to day was

irregular, but the rate from month to month could be calculated.

As another Fall drew near, 200 to 250 miles per hours seemed the safe upper limit. But now it was thought advisable to tell the public that a temporary but drastic atmospheric change had caused transportation difficulties too immense to overcome currently.

IN October, the Government, on the advice of Elden Holcombe, began surreptitiously laying plans for the control of even the small private planes and cars capable of speeds of 100 to 150 miles per hour. Another Christmas came and went and soon afterward Holcombe requested of the Government that a meeting of all interested high officials be called immediately. Foreign delegations were to be there, as long ago the other nations of the world had been acquainted with the facts as soon as this Government became convinced of their validity.

By now Holcombe and Wrightson were regarded by officialdom with a certain reverent awe. These two men had stumbled first upon this immense catastrophe which threatened the world. To them science and the authorities looked.

Dr. Holcombe had promised that he would reveal a new theory at this meeting. He rose in the completely silent room.

"Gentlemen," he said. "I am forced to tell you that the malady that afflicts our dimension is gaining. Of course, you know this yourselves. Even today I am asking the Bureau of Home Transportation to restrict personal travel to speeds not exceeding 100 miles an hour. As you know, international high-speed transportation is nonexistent. It takes us longer to reach Europe or Asia today than it did in the early 1940's. I am sorry to say I do not believe that, left to itself, this monstrous phenomenon will abate and adjust. At the rate of its increase, I believe I can tell you exactly when even the movements of the human being will be affected and must necessarily be restricted as we have had to restrict the life of the machine."

Even among the men in the room, scientists and those already accepting the implications and dangers of this most outré emergency of the world's history, there was a visible paling of faces.

"Do you mean," said Garret emotionally, "that the time will come when, well, we won't be able to run along a street without passing into this other existence, this alien sphere?"

Dr. Holcombe nodded. "It is entirely possible. More, it is probable. I have long hoped that those same forces would themselves rebalance, but that is something that we, as scientists and mathematicians, cannot count upon."

Wrightson looked over his chief's shoulder at one after another of the faces gathered in semi-circle before them. They all bore the same look of shocked wonderment. Even the bombastic Forth had long since given up his diatribic outbursts about being "ruined." Express Airlines, of course, had long since ceased operations except under rigid government order.

Dr. Holcombe spoke on. "I had a twofold purpose in gathering you here today. First among these is that I believe I have a theory that could explain why we have been visited with this monstrous catastrophe. I shall reveal this presently. My second reason is," he paused and raised his hands to quiet the excited buzz that had gone up in the room at the mention of an explanation. "Please, Gentlemen, please. My second reason is that I want you, all of you, to make a most important date with yourselves and with me. We must meet here again in this room on the morning of May 31st next.

"Young Jim Wrightson here has a most vital job to do. I must ask the cooperation of those Government officials in authority. He must have a fleet of airplanes and, in addition, we will need the following materials."

Holcombe cast down upon the table a large pad, its whiteness covered with black figures and inventories. He slid it along the polished surface toward those sitting further down.

"I'd like you all please to look that over and give me the necessary authority. Jim Wrightson must leave in the morning."

With the others clustered around the pad, Holcombe turned to his young assistant and clasped him by the shoulders.

There was affection in the old man's face and Jim felt the physicist's hand on his shoulders tremble.

"Jim," said the Research head as the two walked away from the table toward the huge windows that overlooked the city. "I'm entrusting you with the greatest scientific mission it has been any single man's opportunity to perform."

The older man turned away, his hands still on Jim's shoulder, his voice choked with emotion.

Unformed questions tumbled from the young man's mouth.

"No, Jim," said Holcombe shaking his head gently, "don't ask me a lot of questions. I know that in this, possibly our last bit of research together, there's been a lot that I haven't told you." Holcombe fumbled for and brought from his pocket a long white envelope.

"In here, Jim," said the doctor tapping the manila envelope, "are complete instructions. I should like you not to open them until you have left this meeting and have gone to your hotel room. I don't need to tell you that this mission you're going on tomorrow carries with it a great personal risk. You are going to have to visit many portions of our globe. You're going to be running a race against time, but all the while you are running that race you will have to be on guard against the irregularities of this super-normal dimensional curtain that is descending upon us.

"Those papers," Holcombe gestured back toward the council table where the others were still studying the figures he had given them, "have listed on them the facilities and equipment I have asked the Government to provide you with. Well, I think that takes care of everything," Holcombe said and smiled. "I haven't asked if you would undertake this difficult and dangerous duty because I knew the answer."

Jim nodded, too moved to speak. He clutched Dr. Holcombe affectionately by the arm. Without a further look at the envelope, he took it from his chief and put it an inside pocket.

There was a call from the other side of the room then.

"All right, Doctor," James Garret was speaking. "All these things can be arranged. Now can you give us some suggestion of what it's all about?"

Holcombe, with Jim at his side walked rapidly back toward the table.

"This is what I had to tell you. You will remember that in the last great war, aerial bombardment and the use of explosives was developed to the greatest degree of the world's history. In the early years of the war, tremendous tonnages of high explosives were rained upon many of the countries of the world."

His listeners nodded unimpressedly.

"That's common history," mumbled Forth. "We all know that. Get on with it."

Holcombe disregarded the man's rudeness. All nerves were raw in this year of 1957.

"It's also common history that toward the end of the last war even greater explosions were brought about by the use of rocket-propelled projectiles and finally there was even some military utilization by certain of the belligerents of atomic energy as an explosive force."

THE others nodded.

"Well, Gentlemen. Has it occurred to you that the construction and constitution of our globe, our place not only in the universe but in this thing called our dimension, our sphere of life, might well have been affected by these untoward occurrences on the surface of the earth?

"At the time of the last war nearly all research and nearly all science was universally preoccupied with the thought of evolving new and more terrible ways of destroying life. In the war years the scientist who invented a more powerful explosion was greater than a man who developed a new cure for a dread disease. I think we are justified in saying that this malady that afflicts our beloved earth has come about as the result of those beyond-normal vibrations and shocks caused by the prolonged and continuous explosions of the last war."

Holcombe stepped briskly over to a series of charts and an Azimuthal Equi-distant projection of the world on a rollered framework. With Wrightson's help, he pushed these into a position where all could see. With a pointer he explained one after an-

other, speaking in the same quiet voice as though he were discussing wind or tide currents—instead of the doom of the world.

The next day Jim opened the white envelope in his hotel room. His hands were unsteady as he inserted his thumbnail under the flap and slit it open. Inside were two papers. On one a list of items neatly typed. At the top underlined words read: "A duplicate of this has been given to James Garret. You will find the equipment ready at the city airdrome."

Jim's eyes widened as they ran down the list. A strange assortment of strange materials!

The other piece of paper was a letter. It read:

"Dear Jim:

"By now, you know the worst if you hadn't suspected it from the beginning. Our world's time in its own dimension is short. I have calculated that by the night of May 31st, probably even the movement of breathing or talking or blinking an eye will cause us individuals of the human race to project ourselves in some outlandish fashion into an alien dimension. This will surely happen if the incredible experiment I have entrusted you with fails as I am aware it may. And yet I feel this is our only chance. A duplicate of the list that accompanies this letter has been given to the proper authorities and, as noted, to Mr. Garret. I have given them only the barest idea of your mission. This I shall reveal to them early on May 31st. Precise instructions for your mission follow. Good-by,

"Jim."

It was signed with Dr. Holcombe's scrawl.

On the rest of the sheet of paper beneath the signature were three paragraphs of concise instructions. Jim's eyes wandered from this paper to the one cataloguing the supplies he was to find available at the airport. Despite the dry chillness of the January day, his forehead was damp with perspiration as he made his way out of the hotel and hailed a cab for the airport.

Bright sun slid from high in the afternoon sky through the windows of the National Research Foundation, making huge squares of warm yellow on the floor and the furniture and the faces of those immovable men it caught in its rays. Around the long conference table in Dr. Holcombe's office sat the same group of men who had met there last January. It was evident they had been sitting there for a long time, since morning, in fact. Each showed the signs of those months that had passed. Signs of graying and shrinking worry. Dr. Holcombe himself looked older. In front of him, and in fact the only objects on the long table, were a telephone and a large stopwatch. It was the latter that Dr. Holcombe was concentrating upon. It lay in the spreading path of the sun, its face and hands and revolving sweep-arm sending back small sparkling reflections from the great orb outside.

Dr. Holcombe watched the sweep-hand move around the dial. It touched the zero mark at the top of the face and plunged downward like some toy electric train moving over small black markings that could have been the ties of a track. It was then that Dr. Holcombe broke the silence. He raised his head.

"We have reached a stage, Gentlemen, where I am very much afraid, if anyone rises from this table and moves with unusual speed across the room, he will vanish into this foreign dimension that is eating into ours."

One of the men at the foot of the table began to cough.

"Watch yourself, my dear Hartley. You know a cough is a vigorous activity which we may soon be unable to indulge ourselves in."

The man spoken to reached carefully into his upper vest pocket for the handkerchief that showed itself to be there. As he pulled it out, a cigar came with it and fell to the ground. Automatically, Hartley bent over to pick it up and then a startled gasp hissed through the big chamber.

"Oh, my God," came Hartley's voice as he straightened, his face purple-pink and then draining to an unhealthy white. "It's gone. Just—just from my pocket it dropped, and it's gone!"

Hartley leaned forward, putting his head in his hands on the table. The man at his

side looked down at the floor and then looked at Holcombe, stunned.

"We have only to expect that, Gentlemen," said the doctor of Research. "Be thankful that was merely a cigar. This condition, and you should all be more aware of it than anybody else, this condition is progressing very rapidly. Why do you suppose martial law and state of emergency has been declared through the world for the past several weeks? Why do you suppose even now all movement in the streets has ceased? This should not come as any surprise to us." Holcombe spoke in a voice much as one would use to unruly school children. He looked at the faces around him, and all of them except Hartley looked back at him with a sort of beseeching pathos. Some of the great men of the nation and the world sat here with him full with the knowledge that they were powerless against this illness that had befallen their sphere of life.

HOLCOMBE'S eyes strayed to his watch again. His words came as he looked.

"I am expecting a call from Jim Wrightson. It should come in a few minutes. I shall now reveal to you his mission. Some of you may have guessed it in part from the ingredients I asked you to supply.

"In the over-four months that he has been away, he has placed at strategic spots on the earth's surface great caches of explosives. These have been put in barren uninhabited yet geographically strategic locations. These are all hooked together by means of radio locator and at a precise instant and on instruction from me, over this telephone he will set off those charges by radio sensitizers from his vantage point. It is my belief that the cumulative effect of these explosions may once again right the dimensional relationships of our particular sphere in the universe. In other words, it is an attempt to rebalance the delicate atmospheric and dimensional scales."

"Suppose you're wrong," a voice asked.

"If I'm wrong," said Holcombe, "we on this earth shall continue on into a sort of immobility and finally non-existence, or we shall hurry that process perhaps by a few hours. I believe it is our duty to humanity to take these risks, for no other way—"

The phone at his hand buzzed imperatively. Holcombe reached for it and then brought the receiver gently to his ear.

"Yes? Yes, Jim. Is everything prepared?"

The others saw Holcombe nod his head in a satisfied manner. His eyes moved quickly to the stopwatch in front of him.

"We lack about five minutes and thirty-five seconds. Be very careful, Jim, where you are. Yes, yes, I'm sure you knew how far progressed things were."

With one hand Holcombe lifted the stopwatch and held it closer.

"I shall say five, Jim, when my watch lacks five seconds of the precise time. You count four from the time you hear my voice and then trip your radio sensitizer setting off the charges."

For several minutes then a silence settled upon that room greater than any of the men therein had ever borne. It was a silence from within, but also a silence from without.

That without which had always been so full of the bustling noises of the city and was now so completely quiet that the lack of sound was like a density of atmosphere, like something that each man thought he should be able to feel and see between his hands like thick cotton. The life-minutes of the earth were short now. Each man fought the slightest inclination to move, fearful of what that movement might mean, jealous of each last second. Long ago they had stopped fighting against the irrevocable reality of this thing they once tried to tell themselves could not be real.

It was then that Holcombe's voice broke on them, a staccato bark that formed the single word "Fire!"

For a few seconds there was merely a continuation of nothingness, and then slowly from far away like an approaching thunderstorm came a deep distant rumbling, a rumbling that grew in sound and intensity and transmitted itself to the men sitting in the 95th floor office. The once lifeless air of that silent room seemed to tremble and become charged again with new energy. The rumbling was followed by a series of other rumblings, some louder, some lesser, until finally all sound died away.

No man dared move.

Holcombe's face was screwed up with concentration.

The more dire of the possibilities had not happened. And yet . . .?

VERY slowly the doctor extended his arm over the floor. He opened the fingers of his left hand and let the stopwatch slide off his palm. There was a metallic clang and the tinkle of glass. For a moment even Holcombe was stunned and then a beatific smile broke over his face. There was no need for words. The other men were suddenly hugging each other. Some of them had leaped from the table now and were striding toward him. Holcombe waved them away with one hand and spoke into the phone again.

"Hello, Jim." His voice was husky with emotion. "It's worked! My boy, our theory worked."

"Come right back, Jim," said Holcombe, "and I think," he smiled, "I think you can travel as fast as you want to now." He hung up.

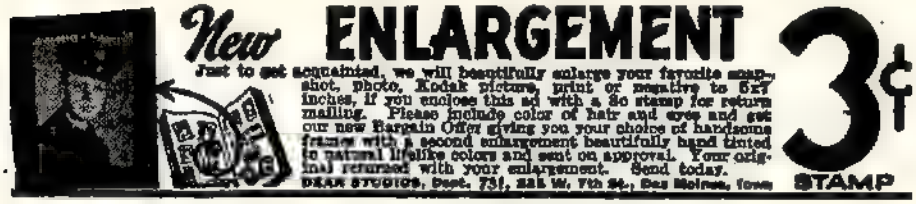
The room was a tumultuous scene. By now Holcombe was the only one of its occupants still seated. The doctor of Research looked for a time at these dignified middle-aged and elderly men cavorting and talking and gesticulating, and then he rose, and as he did so, his figure attracted the eye of one after another. They turned toward him, their faces flushed and smiling. Several started again to congratulate him but Holcombe impatiently nodded these commendations off.

"Is—is the danger completely passed, Dr. Holcombe?" Albert Forth offered.

"It is, Gentlemen," said Dr. Holcombe. "To the best of my judgment we have saved our dimension," his face was stern. "But the most important knowledge of all I must now make known to you and it must be transmitted through you to the governments of the world—the governments now and even the governments that are to be, stretching on into the future.

"All of us abhor the thought of another war. We have believed and hoped, a decade after the second great war, that we could forever avoid another struggle. We have believed that through truth and peaceful formulas we could band together and forever outlaw war, prohibiting any differences which, allowed to go unsolved, might some day somewhere cause men to raise their hands against other men.

"But we have a new incentive now, Gentlemen. There must never be another war, for so surely as I stand before you, that conflagration with its gigantic explosions and vibrations of a new and more horrible intensity would again cause our world to fall sick. The phrase, 'Another war means the end of mankind,' has a new and more terrible meaning. Scientifically speaking, Gentlemen—and of this I am convinced—another war might well mean the end of our dimension, of our world! We dare not ever again chance it!"

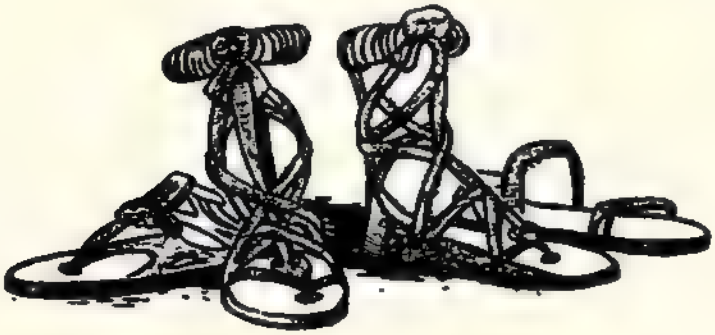


SUPERSTITIONS

IN VARIOUS PARTS OF THE WORLD THE MOON IS CONSIDERED WITH AROUSED FEELINGS OF SUPERSTITIOUS AWE OR OF RELIGIOUS VENERATION! PEOPLE OF NORTHEASTERN SIBERIA BELIEVE THAT A MAN WHO LOOKS TOO LONG AT THE MOON MAY BE BEREFT OF HIS WITS OR *MAY BE CARRIED AWAY ALTOGETHER!* THE BABYLONIANS BELIEVED THAT SIN, THE MOON-GOD, COULD PROVOKE *LEPROSY, DROPSY, AND FEVER*. IN SECTIONS OF EUROPE IT IS BELIEVED THAT WATER FROM A SPRING OR WELL IN WHICH THE MOON SHINES *SHOULD NOT BE DRUNK*, SINCE THIS WOULD BE TO ABSORB THE EVIL INFLUENCES OF THE MOON AND THAT ***ONE WHO SEWS BY MOONLIGHT SEWS HIS OWN GRAVECLOTHES!***

AND TABOOS by Hill

IT IS BELIEVED THAT IF A CROW FLIES OVER A HOUSE AND CROAKS THREE TIMES, THE WEATHER WILL BE FOUL — BUT IF HE FLUTTERS ABOUT A WINDOW AND CAWS, *IT FOREBODES A* ***DEATH!***



IT WAS THOUGHT UNLUCKY BY THE ROMANS TO PUT ON THE LEFT SHOE FIRST, *OR TO PUT THE SHOE ON THE WRONG FOOT!* IN ANGLO SAXON MARRIAGES, THE FATHER DELIVERED THE BRIDE'S SHOE TO THE BRIDEGROOM, AND THE BRIDEGROOM TOUCHED THE BRIDE ON THE HEAD WITH IT ***TO SHOW HIS AUTHORITY!***

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

THEY cut the sky down to my size and threw it over the Michigan Lake, put some kids yelling on yellow sand with bouncing balls, a gull or two, a criticizing parent, and me breaking out of a wet wave and finding this world bleary and moist.

I ran up on the beach.

Mama swabbed me with a furry towel. "Stand there and dry," she said.

I stood there and watched the sun take away the water beads on my arms. I replaced them with goose-pimples.

"My, there's a wind," said Mama. "Put on your sweater."

"Wait'll I watch my goose-bumps," I said.

"Harold," said Mama.

I inserted me into my sweater and watched the waves come up and fall down on the beach. But not clumsily. On purpose, with a green sort of elegance. Even a drunken man could not collapse with such elegance as those waves.

It was September. In the last days when things are getting sad for no reason. The beach was so long and lonely with only about six people on it. The kids quit bouncing the ball because somehow the wind made them sad, too, whistling the way it did, and they sat down and felt autumn come along the long beach.

All of the hot dog places were boarded up with strips of golden planking, sealing in all the mustard, onion, meat odors of the long, joyful summer. It was like nailing

By RAY BRADBURY

. . . and the Lake keeps people as they were, forever and ever

summer into a series of coffins. One by one the places slammed their covers down, padlocked their doors, and the wind came and touched the sand, blowing away all of the million footprints of July and August. It got so that now, in September, there was nothing but the mark of my rubber tennis shoes and Donald and Delaus Schabold's feet, and their father down by the water curve.

Sand blew up in curtains on the sidewalks, and the merry-go-round was hidden with canvas, all of the horses frozen in mid-air on their brass poles, showing teeth, galloping on. With only the wind for music, slipping through canvas.

I stood there. Everyone else was in school. I was not. Tomorrow I would be on my way westward across the United States on a train. Mom and I had come to the beach for one last brief moment.

There was something about the loneliness that made me want to get away by myself. "Mama, I want to run up the beach aways," I said.

"All right, but hurry back, and don't go near the water."

I RAN. Sand spun under me and the wind lifted me. You know how it is, running; arms out so you feel veils from your fingers, caused by wind. Like wings.

Mama withdrew into the distance, sitting. Soon she was only a brown speck and I was all alone. Being alone is a newness to a twelve-year-old child. He is so used to people around. The only way he can be alone is in his mind. That's why children imagine such fantastic things. There are so many real people around, telling children what and how to do, that a boy has to run off down a beach, even if it's only in his mind, to get by himself in his own world with his own miniature values.

So now I was really alone.

I went down to the water and let it cool up to my stomach. Always before, with the crowd, I hadn't dared to look. But now—Sawing a man in half. A magician. Water is like that. It feels as if you were sawed in half and part of you, sugar, is dissolving away. Cool water, and once in a while a very elegantly stumbling wave that fell with a flourish of lace.

I called her name. A dozen times I called it.

"Tally! Tally! Oh, Tally!"

FUNNY, but you really expect answers to your calling when you are young. You feel that whatever you may think can be real. And sometimes maybe that is not so wrong.

I thought of Tally, swimming out into the water last May, with her pigtails trailing, blonde. She went laughing, and the sun was on her small twelve-year-old shoulders. I thought of the water settling quiet, of the life-guard leaping into it, of Tully's mother screaming, and how Tally never came out. . . .

The life-guard tried to persuade her to come out, but she did not. He came back with only bits of water weed in his big knuckled fingers, and Tally was gone. She would not sit across from me at school any longer, or chase indoor balls on the brick street on summer nights. She had gone too far out, and the lake would not let her come back in.

And now in the lonely autumn when the sky was huge and the water was huge and the beach was so very long, I had come down for the last time, alone.

I called her name over and over. Tally, oh, Tally!

The wind blew so very softly, over my ears, the way wind blows over the mouth of sea-shells and sets them whispering. The water rose and embraced my chest and then to my knees, and up and down, one way and another, sucking under my heels.

"Tally! Come back, oh, Tally!"

I was only twelve. But I know how much I loved her. It was that love that comes before all significance of body and morals. It was that love that is no more bad than wind and sea and sand lying side by side forever. It was made of all the warm long days together at the beach, and the humming quiet days of droning education at the school. All the long autumn days of the years passed when I had carried her books home from school.

Tally!

I called her name for the last time. I shivered. I felt water on my face and did not know how it got there. The waves had

not splashed me there. My own tide was coming in and I downed in it.

Turning, I retreated to the sand and stood there for half an hour, hoping for one glimpse, one sign, one little bit of Tally to remember. Then, in a sort of symbol, I knelt and built a castle of sand, shaping it fine and building it up as Tally and I had often built them, so many of them. But this time I only built half of it. Then I got up.

"Tally, if you hear me, come in and build the rest."

I began to walk off toward that far away speck that was Mama. The water came in and blended the sea castle circle by circle, mashing it down little by little, into the original smoothness.

I could not help but think that there are no castles in life that one builds that some wave does not spread down into the old, old formlessness.

Silently, I walked up the beach.

Far away, a merry-go-round jangled faintly, but it was only the wind.

I WENT away on the train the next day. Across the cornlands of Illinois. A train has a poor memory. It soon puts all behind it. It forgets the rivers of childhood, the bridges, the lakes, the valleys, the cottages, the pains and joys. It spreads them out behind and they drop back of a horizon.

I lengthened my bones, put flesh on them, changed my young mind for an older one, threw away clothes as they no longer fitted, shifted from grammar to high-school, to college books, to law-books. And then there was a young woman in Sacramento, there was a preacher, and there were words and kisses.

I continued with my law study. But the time I was twenty-two, I had almost forgotten what the East was like.

Margaret suggested that our delayed honeymoon trip be taken back in that direction.

A train works both ways, like a memory. It brings rushing back all those things you left behind so many years before.

Lake Bluff, population 10,000, came up over the sky. Margaret looked so handsome in her fine new clothes. She kept watching me as I watched my old world gather me back into its living. Her strong white hands held onto mine as the train slid into Bluff Station and our baggage was escorted out.

So many years, and the things they do to people's faces and bodies. When we walked through the town, arm in arm, I saw no one I recognized. There were faces with echoes in them. Echoes of hikes on ravine trails. Faces with small laughter in them from closed grammar schools and swinging on metal-linked swings and going up and down on teeter-tauters. But I didn't speak. I just walked and looked and filled up inside with all those memories, like leaves stacked for burning in autumn.

Our days were happy there. Two weeks in all, revisiting all the places together. I thought I loved Margaret very well. At least I thought I did.

It was on one of the last days that we walked down by the shore. It was quite as late in the year as that day so many years before, but the first evidences of desertion were coming upon the beach. The people were thinning out, several of the hot dog places had been shuttered and nailed, and the wind, as always, had been waiting there to sing for us.

I almost saw Mama sitting on the sand as she used to sit. I had that feeling again of wanting to be alone. But I could not force myself to say it to Margaret. I only held onto her and waited.

It got late in the day. Most of the children had gone home, and only a few men and women remained basking in the windy sun.

The life-guard boat pulled up on the shore. The life-guard stepped out of it, slowly, with something in his arms.

I froze there. I held my breath and I felt small, only twelve years old, very little, very infinitesimal and afraid. The wind howled. I could not see Margaret. I could see only the beach, the life-guard slowly emerging from his boat with a gray sack in his hands, not very heavy, and his face almost as gray and lined.

"Stay here, Margaret," I said. I don't know why I said it.

"But, why?"

"Just stay here, that's all—"

I walked slowly down the sand to where the life-guard stood. He looked at me.

"What is it?" I asked.

THE life-guard kept looking at me for a long time and he couldn't speak. He put the gray sack down on the sand, the water whispered wet up around it and went back.

"What is it?" I insisted.

"She's dead," said the life-guard quietly.

I waited.

"Funny," he said, softly, "funniest thing I ever saw. She's been dead—a long time?"

I repeated his words. "A long time?"

"Ten years, I'd say. There haven't been any children drowned here *this* year. There were twelve children drowned here since 1933, but we recovered all of their bodies before a few hours had passed. All except one, I remember. This body here, why it must be ten years in the water. It's not—pleasant."

"Open it," I said. I don't know why I said it. The wind was louder.

He fumbled with the sack. "The way I know it's a little girl, is because she's still wearing a locket. There's nothing much else to tell by—"

"Hurry, man OPEN IT!" I cried.

"I better not do that," he said. Then maybe he saw the way my face must have looked. "She was such a little girl—"

He opened it only part way. That was enough.

The beach was deserted. There was only the sky and the wind and the water and the autumn coming on lonely. I looked down at her there.

I said something, over and over. The life-guard looked at me. "Where did you find her?" I asked.

"Down the beach, in the shallow water. Down that way. It's a long, long time for her, ain't it?"

I shook my head.

"Yes, it is. Oh, God, yes it is."

I thought, people grow. I have grown. But she has not changed. She is still small. She is still young. Death does not permit growth or change. She still has golden hair. She will be forever young and I will love her forever, oh God, I will love her forever.

The life-guard tied up the sack again.

Down the beach, a few moments later, I walked by myself. I found something I didn't really expect. This is where the life-guard found her body, I said to myself.

There, at the water's edge, lay a sand-castle, only half built. Just like Tally and I used to make them. She—half. And I—half.

I looked at it. This is where they found Tally. I knelt beside the sand-castle and saw the little prints of feet coming in from the lake and going back out to the lake again—and not returning ever.

Then—I knew.

"I'll help you to finish it," I said.

I did. I built the rest of it up very slowly, and then I arose and turned away and walked off, so as not to watch it crumble in the waves, as all things crumble.

I walked back up the beach to where a strange, awful person named Margaret was waiting for me, smiling . . .

The Gothic Window

By DOROTHY QUICK

A RAINY week-end had reduced the house party to a state of boredom from which there seemed nothing left to lift it. Two tables of bridge had carried them from Friday through Sunday, but Sunday night when the four men and four women left the dining room after dinner and settled down at the bridge

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

In dark medieval days a living person was always built into the walls of a new building—

tables that had been set up there was a feeling of tension. Anne knew the reason. It was not all satiety with contract; it was the Rowleys. They did not play a straight game. The crowd had suspected it for some time but they had never been sure before. The Rowleys—Claire and Jim—had been too subtle for that. The week-end session, however, had loosened their guard. They evidently had not been able to resist the temptation to make a killing. Anne, praying for sunshine, had been aghast at the sums they were piling up. She had finally separated them, but even at different tables they managed their system to some extent.

Anne did not wonder at the strained atmosphere. It had been inevitable.

Anne had hoped for a great deal from this week-end, not only for herself where Sheridan Crawford was concerned, but for Nancy Blake and Bob Neins. Bob was so in love with Nancy. When Anne planned the house party she had thought that her own budding romance would flower and help Bob's.

She had not meant to have the Rowleys, partly on account of the bridge, but more because of Nancy and her penchant for Jim. If it had not been for Jim, Nancy would have said "yes" to Bob ages ago.

Anne had intended having a foursome over the week-end, but Claire Rowley had sent a wire, "Can we come to you this week-end?" and ever since their school days Anne had never been able to resist an S.O.S. from Claire. Claire was too proud to ask favors unless a real necessity lay behind the request. Knowing this Anne had wired "yes" and asked Lou and Gib Silvers, the cheeriest couple she knew, to bridge the gap and make eight. Anne had always been fond of Claire, always looked up to her. She had hated to watch the breaking down of something fine in her friend that had been going on since her marriage to Jim, that marriage which had so amply proved you can't touch pitch without being tarred. Jim was somewhat like pitch—dark, mysterious, compelling. In a vague fashion Anne could understand the attraction for Claire—and Nancy. It was purely physical. Jim was like a black panther. In him was the cruelty and stealthiness of the beast, also its fascination. Claire would hate the cheating but he would see that she did what he wanted and insist that she do it well, otherwise, Anne suspected, he would not be unwilling to lift a hand against his wife.

She could almost see it coming up against the porcelain-like skin of her friend, not Jim's strong, muscular hand on which the dark hair grew proudly, but a paw heavily padded with long claws lost in the red gold of Claire's hair. Anne shuddered from the force of her own imagination, looked up, and met Claire's eyes. They were the eyes of an animal caught in a trap—sick, desperate, a small thing waiting for the panther to attack.

Anne smiled at Claire, and saw at the same time how Jim's heavy hand fell on his wife's shoulder. "Let us be gay, my dear," he said. "You mustn't be so serious about your bridge."

Claire shuddered involuntarily.

"If we played much more bridge, I'd become a maniac with a double quantity of raves," Lou Silvers announced quickly, to cover up something almost naked.

Sheridan backed her up. "I'm about played out myself." The way he looked at Anne was a caress.

"If I were carrying out the animal simile," Anne thought, "Sherry would be a dog. The kind that rescues drowning children, rouses the household when there's a fire, and takes first prize at all the shows—steady, dependable, with all the attraction of a well-groomed thoroughbred."

The Silvers were rollicking mountain goats, flitting sure-footedly from crag to crag, having a tremendously good time in the process.

Nancy was a butterfly, too busy enjoying the various gardens to settle down to any one, and Bob was a horse dragging a delivery wagon, looking with longing eyes to-

ward whatever garden Nancy graced with her presence. Bob worked hard and loved Nancy with all his heart; and Nancy, butterfly Nancy, was more intrigued with a black panther than a work horse.

"Butterflies and horses! This metaphor is getting all mixed up," Anne thought. "I can't find one for myself unless I'm the country mouse."

It was not a bad comparison. She had an alert piquant face which served as a provocative setting for big brown eyes. Her hair was of that indefinite shade known as "mouse" colored. She was small, and completely fascinating.

"We're waiting for you, Jim," Lou Silvers called. "It's your bid. We might as well finish this rubber."

CURIOUSLY enough Jim did not go back to the table. He stood still with his hand on his wife's shoulder but his eyes went down the room toward the Gothic window at the end. He stirred restlessly and moved away from Claire toward Nancy. Watching him, Claire shrank back into the tapestry chair till she seemed a part of it.

The Silvers were frankly curious; Bob impatiently tapping his finger against his knee; and Nancy—Nancy was no longer a butterfly. She was a bird fascinated by a snake, and Jim was the snake readying to strike.

He walked up and down. Then suddenly he stopped behind Nancy's chair, his hands resting on her shoulders just as a few moments ago they had touched his wife's.

Nancy shivered a little, and Anne felt rather than saw the pressure of Jim's fingers upon her skin.

"Aren't you going to play?" Nancy asked.

"Should I?" Jim laughed unpleasantly. "Now if I were a wild pagan, content to take what the gods send, and not ask questions, perhaps I would."

Nancy had half turned to him, her eager eyes aglow, her body straining upwards as though she wanted it to touch his. "But, Jim, what has that to do with bridge?"

There was one of those pauses which people say mean an angel is passing by. Anne slipped her hand in Sherry's. The way he caught hold of it conveyed a message to her. She curled her fingers inside his and felt the instant response. His grasp actually hurt but it was a glorious pain.

"Sherry," she whispered, but her faint tone was lost in Jim's booming voice.

"Nothing to do with the game, blessed Damosel. It's just that I'm restless. I can't put my mind to cards."

Anne saw the quick surprise flood into Claire's face, followed by relief as strong as that which Anne herself was experiencing.

Jim went on almost as though he were talking to himself. "There's something about that window down there. It does things to me. Makes me unable to concentrate. I've noticed it before but never so strongly as tonight. I keep looking at it—the one that's different from the rest."

Bob seized on the diversion eagerly. "You mean that ancient looking leaded one? I've always wondered about that. It's being another style from all those French ones. It opens out, just like they do, but it doesn't match."

"Shall I tell you the story about it?" Anne asked. She immediately noticed that Nancy transferred her attention from Jim to herself. An overwhelming desire to keep that attention came over Anne. She determined that she would make every effort to do so. She looked questioningly at Jim. "Shall I?"

"I wish you would," Jim replied. "Ever since we've been here I've been conscious of it. Seems ridiculous but it's almost as though it were trying to influence me in some way!" He laughed, looked at the window again and sobered suddenly. Then with an obvious effort of will power, wrenched his eyes away from it, came around from behind Nancy's chair to sit at her feet, his head dangerously near her knee. "If the window has a history, Anne,

tell it." He might have been issuing a royal command.

ANNE took a little breath and began tensely. "The first time I saw the window was in a little town in Spain. I've even forgotten the name of the place. It was miles off in the mountains beyond Toledo, but Mother had read about a monastery there in the life of one of those French princesses who married a Spanish king and came to an untimely death. It seemed she had taken refuge there during a progress of something when there was a bad storm and the roads were blocked.

"Mother was extremely interested in that particular phase of history, so we climbed up the mountain on those funny Spanish mules with their red nets edged with bright scarlet balls that kept bobbing around. We stayed in the guest house just as the Queen had done. Mother managed to get the room the royal lady had slept in so many hundreds of years ago. I don't believe it was a bit changed. The heavily carved oak bed had a wooden canopy so weighty it would have taken a derrick to move it, and the gold damask cover was ancient enough.

It was all very authentic and Mother was thrilled. I was myself, and that's saying a lot, because the future interests me more than the past."

Anne looked at Sherry, and in his eyes was an expression that boded well for the days to come. The rest of the party had silenced. Now she had everyone's wholehearted attention. Especially Jim's.

"We got there late at night, so after we exclaimed over everything we went to bed," Anne continued. "I slept with Mother and Father had a single room nearby. We always did that in out of the way places. It wasn't until the next morning that we really saw the place, and it *was* beautiful. Far too old world and Gothically glamorous for me to describe adequately. The monks were polite and kindly. Some were jolly and talkative, others morose and taciturn. I liked the latter best, but Mother pumped history out of the former and enjoyed herself tremendously. She decided to stay several days."

"You haven't mentioned the window," Jim scoffed.

"Hush." Nancy put her hand over his mouth. "That will come later. This is the build-up."

Anne could see his thick lips kissing Nancy's fingers. She hurried on with her story.

"The refectory garden was lovely. The monks had 'green fingers.' There were flowers everywhere and narrow paths of stone and grass all around the garden and the cloisters, finely carved pillars supporting the arched roof that covered the outside path around the buildings. The garden was in the center. All along the buildings were Gothic windows, great things that were made of little panes leaded together with beautifully cast hinges and knobs, just like the one you see here. They usually stood open—all but one, that was always firmly closed! When Mother tried to open it she found it was locked and couldn't be budged. She asked about it because it was a convenient way into the guest house, but for once her jolly informants turned silent. They gave her no information and it was obvious that they wanted to steer her interest away from that particular Gothic window.

"They didn't know Mother. Her bump of curiosity expands with opposition. She kept at it but while she was engaged in the wearing down process something happened that made some explanations imperative. Mother and I were allowed to walk in the garden while the monks were at even prayer and one day as we came near to the window we saw it was open and a monk lay in front of it. We thought he had fainted, but when we got to him we discovered he was dead.

"Dead!—with an expression of unutterable delight stamped on his features. As long as I live I'll never forget his face. I decided, looking down at him, it must be worth dying to achieve such bliss.

"It was Mother who noticed that one of the panes of the window had fallen out. It was stained glass with magnificent colorings—rich reds and blues, with a queer grotesque looking figure in its center.

"I went to give the alarm. The monks came back with me, and when they saw what had happened, crossed themselves and knelt down and prayed. We knelt, too. When that part was over the Abbot gave an order and two of the monks bore their comrade away.

"The Abbot picked up the pane of stained glass, mumbled some kind of Latin over it, and raised it up. Obviously he was going to dash it to pieces on the stone flags.

"Mother stopped him. 'Don't! Don't do that. I'll buy it. Please!'

"He hesitated, and Mother made an offer then and there which I may say was a princely one. It impressed the Abbot. He set down with care the glass he had been so intent upon destroying. 'Senora,' he said in courtly Spanish, which fortunately we understood and spoke, 'I will gladly sell this glass to you. For the amount you have named I could do much good among the people of the village. But before I accept your offer I must tell you the history of this window.'

"Then he launched into a long tale that went back to the beginning of the monastery—to its very building. It seems in those dark medieval days a living person was always built into the walls of a new building—usually a man or woman who had been sentenced to death. In the building of this monastery the usual procedure was followed and a man was immured into the wall close by this particular window. How evil the man was the Abbot of that far-off day found out after the man's spirit began playing tricks with everyone who passed through the window. The list of things the ghost of the window got away with was terrific and our Abbot went through them all. At first they were just tricks and little evils—broken arms, ankles, wrists, bad falls, and minor things, but as time went on the ghost grew more powerful. He ceased playing tricks and went in for souls. He bribed his followers by wonderful visions, strange enchantments, which were theirs when they passed through the window, dreams and sensations which the monks who experienced them described as wonderful beyond words. So wonderful they disobeyed their leader and passed through the window as often as they could. That is, until one of them was found dead outside of it with an expression of such bliss on his face as we had seen on the monk whose dead body had just been carried away.

"Even for such bliss men were not willing to die, so the window was unused for a time, then the monks forgot and began once more to taste its joys. Once tried, it was like opium, so insidious they could not resist it till it brought them to their deaths. They could not—or would not—describe what they saw, the dreams induced, but they were potent enough to die for.

"The Abbot of those far-off days tried locking the window. The locks were picked! He sealed them and the seals were broken, then finally he told his favorite son-in-Christ that he himself would pass through the window and find out first-hand what joys it bestowed.

"He did so—and in the morning he was found dead. But on his face there was no expression of beatitude. Instead there was indescribable horror stamped indelibly upon his countenance."

LOU SILVERS laughed shrilly. "Anne, this is growing worse and worse. You don't mean all this actually happened."

Anne nodded. "Yes, and there's more."

"Go on, Anne." Claire was intense, at last galvanized into forgetting her own tragedy.

"Throughout the years this continued, our Abbot told us, right down to the monk we had seen. Dead men, with either bliss or horror on their faces, outside the Gothic window. If Mother wanted the pane of glass—which through some grim humor had been fashioned with a kind of portrait

of the man immured in the wall—she could have it. He would be glad to have the money she offered, but he warned her against taking the glass. Mother said she wasn't afraid. After all the man wasn't buried in the glass.

" 'No,' said the Abbot, crossing himself over and over. After some hesitation he went on to say that there was undoubtedly an evil aura over the entire window. The man had been a most notorious sinner, libertine, and follower of the black arts. Some of his wicked essence might be contained in the representation of him in the pane of glass. However, it had been exorcised with book and bell and he would do so again before giving it to its purchaser. It might be, too, that removed from its surroundings and the proximity to the wall it would lose its power. He hoped so for our sakes. As to the window—he was going to have it blocked off. No one would go through it again in his lifetime.

"So that was that. Mother paid her money and got the pane of glass. It was about two feet square as you can see by looking. She liked the shape of the window so much that I drew a sketch of it for her, and when we built this house she had it copied for the east window and had the original pane of glass inserted. Everyone admired it and Mother was very pleased, but the first time she walked through it she stumbled over the sill and fell and broke her arm."

There were a few indrawn breaths and an audible "oh!" from Gib Silvers.

Anne continued. "That could have been an ordinary accident. When I went through I got a sprained ankle, which of course could have been a coincidence, but when Dad broke his leg and sprained his wrist after passing through—*we* locked the window."

"Did you have any sensations of bliss or horror?" Jim was intently interested.

"It's funny, but I did. I can't describe it, but as I went by the pane that held that strange half portrait I felt a wave of happiness sweeping over me—a kind of 'all's right with the world' sort of thing," Anne admitted. "Mother said she'd experienced much the same sort of feeling. Even Dad had to concede he hadn't felt any pain until they moved him away from the window."

"You keep calling it a window. It's really doors." Bob was literal.

"No. It's a window that opens. They had them often in the old monasteries. You can see how beautiful it is, but it's horrible, too." Anne shivered. "As I told you, we kept it locked, but stupidly enough we left the key in it. One day a friend of Dad's visiting us was alone and opened it and walked through. We found him later. He was dead, and on his face was that same look of indescribable bliss we had seen on the monk's face. The doctor said he's had a sudden heart attack and snuffed out like a lamp, but we knew better. Still, there was no use telling about the window. No one would believe it. Now we keep it locked and Dad has the key in his desk."

"How do you explain it," practical Bob was asking.

"We don't. It's beyond explaining. Perhaps as the Abbot said, the portrait in the glass has some of the evil powers of its original; perhaps it's because so much that was awful was associated with it that its aura is still given off. Inanimate things can do that, you know. But whatever the explanation *we keep it locked and see that no one goes through it.*"

Claire shivered convulsively. "I don't like your window, Anne. I for one shan't go near it."

"Nor I," Nancy chorused along with the Silvers.

Bob still looked doubtful, Sherry thoughtful. Only Jim's gaze wandered off toward the end of the room and the stained glass pane. "It's almost as though it were alive," he muttered.

"It's late. I'm going to light the light and go to bed," Gib Silvers announced, "and if your electric bill goes up this month, Anne, it's your own fault. After

(*Continued on page* 87)

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WEIRD TALES FOR JULY

OUT MAY FIRST

The Gothic Window

(*Continued from page 85*)

that yarn I shall probably keep the light burning all night."

Gradually they drifted off, avoiding the window as they went out into the hall. Jim would have gone over to it but Nancy pulled his arm away. Anne lingered while Sherry fixed the fire for the night. While he was busy lifting off a half burned log, setting it over on the side, Claire came to Anne.

"Thank you for everything," she whispered.

"I haven't done anything. I wish I could." Anne put her arm around Claire, felt her friend's slim body tremble.

"I didn't want to force us on you, Anne. He made me." Claire dropped subterfuge. "He wanted to be with Nancy. He's stalking her like a hunter does a rabbit, and I can do nothing—nothing but watch it happen while a little more of me dies. If only all of me could die, Anne, instead of bits at a time." Her speech ended in a dry sob.

"Why don't you leave him?"

"I can't. There are things you know nothing about that hold me to him. Things as dark and terrible as your window, and I'm as lost as that spirit confined in it. There's no hope for me as long as I'm useful to him, as long as I amuse him sometimes. But only half of me is miserable—the other half—" she stopped abruptly, then went on in a matter of fact fashion. "I'm very grateful to you, Anne. You saved me a bad time by having us here."

"Is this all right, Anne?" Sherry called out.

Before Anne could answer Claire bent over and kissed her cheek. "Good-night, Anne." It was like the touch of falling thistledown and Claire was gone as quickly as though she had actually been thistledown herself.

"Coming, Sherry," Anne called to the back of the room. Just then Nancy came out of the corridor.

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"I heard what Claire said, Anne, that part about Jim stalking me as though I were a rabbit."

THE animal simile again, and it *was* appropriate. Nancy looked like a frightened bunny at the moment. Her nose wrinkled as she said jerkily, "It's true, Anne. Jim's the hunter and he's going to get me." She shivered convulsively as Claire had.

"Nonsense," Anne told her. "See here, Nancy, you've got some sense. Forget Jim, marry Bob and get some real happiness from life."

"I want to. I love Bob. I really do, in an unexciting, long-lasting way. But Jim does something to me. You wouldn't understand. You belong to the light, Anne. Jim is of the dark, and I want to be in the light but the dark calls to me. If it weren't for Jim I could be happy with Bob, but Jim—he does something to me as unexplainable as your Gothic window. I think the hunter will bag his game, and God help the rabbit."

"No—no. See here, Nancy," Anne spoke hurriedly because Sherry was calling again. "Go to bed. I'll see you in the morning. We'll talk. Jim's a—"

"A cheat—at cards and love—a wife beater—a—oh, I know, but talking won't help the unholy fascination he has for me. Still, I'll do what you say. I'll go to bed now and see you in the morning."

She disappeared toward the stairs. Poor Claire, poor Nancy, what would happen to them? If only she could do something for them, Anne thought as she went to Sherry.

"I love you, Anne," he said simply. Anne, forgetting everything but her own happiness, went into his outstretched arms.

It was much later when they had their future life completely mapped out that Anne said, "We must go up, Sherry. We ought to get some sleep. I don't want to announce our engagement in the morning looking like an old hag."

"As though you could!" Sherry ex-

claimed, but nevertheless he walked along with her, kissing her hand at every step.

"Oh, Sherry, look!" Anne pointed. "No one noticed that the key was in the window! Suppose they had—my story would have been ruined."

"But I thought you said the key was in your father's desk?"

"I did. I made that up along with the rest of it."

"You mean there wasn't any truth in that convincing tale?"

"Not a word—except that Mother did buy the glass in Spain and copied a window she admired." Anne removed the key and slipped it in the drawer of the nearby desk. "I had to do something to stop the bridge."

Sherry whistled. "You ought to write fiction! When I asked you to marry me I'd no idea how much talent you had. Why, Anne, that was masterly. If I'd gone through that window, anything might have happened to me. Power of mind over matter. I actually believed you. Do you think it's safe to start such things? Suppose someone actually walked through and something happened."

"But it couldn't. There wasn't a word of truth in it."

"No one knows that, and when a thing is believed strongly enough it becomes true —to the believer, at any rate. Your story was as convincing as this, my darling." He kissed her so thoroughly that Anne admitted he was right.

"I'll confess I made it up when we tell them about us in the morning," she conceded.

But in the morning they found the Gothic window open, its key in the lock and Jim Rowley lying outside in a queer contorted position.

On his face was an expression of mingled bliss and horror—almost as though in the midst of terrific joy he had foreseen unspeakable doom.

He was quite dead.

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Behind the Iron Mask

Robert Bloch tells us something of the reasons behind *Iron Mask*, his latest story, in this issue:

Readers of WT may wonder why I am using a conventional story-form complete with hero, heroine, happy ending, and a "formula" plot containing many *cliches*.

The reason interests me as much as anyone else. In anticipation of questions and comment, allow me to explain.

Like all those cursed with imagination, I've long been fascinated with the great legends that are a heritage of our literature and history . . . the fables clustering around the names of a motley assortment of characters—the Wandering Jew, the Lost Dauphin, Marshal Ney, John Wilkes Booth, Jack the Ripper. They are the step-children of history, with both their origins

and ends clouded in mystery and conjecture. Naturally, the Man in the Iron Mask looms as one of the greatest names in the field of semi-myth.

He could have been *anybody*. I started with that premise. At first I wanted to write a yarn about a modern Iron Mask . . . the faceless soldier returning for vengeance. Upon doing some research, I decided I might write a story about the historical Iron Mask set against his own times. Then I recalled Roger Bacon and wondered about putting Iron Mask in medieval England. Finally I reached my ultimate concept of putting Iron Mask completely beyond the pale of humanity.

So there I was, with 4 or 5 stories in mind, and the necessity of choosing but one of them.

The answer was to incorporate the whole set of them. I wanted to have the reader come away from the story remembering the cold, enigmatic figure that stalks through the shadows of History . . . Iron Mask.

Robert Bloch.

To Be Continued

H. Bedford-Jones says that the story behind "Unpublished Story" has an occult basis —and a factual one. And, further, the tale isn't all told by any means!

Reports Bedford-Jones:

"Unpublished Story" actually runs down, as far as it can be run down, the famous grave of Alaric. Some day it will undoubtedly be opened up and made to disgorge its treasures; why not as a result of the war?

The most interesting thing about this story is, I think, the curious space-time effect—the point of time in time, the water standing still, etc. There is no bluff about the occult in the story; it plays the thing straight and gives the facts—as you'll find out for yourself some day.

The account given of Alaric is correct. He was not a pagan barbarian, but a Christian, and a smart soldier, the best of his day. He was on his way to conquer Africa when fever got him. Malaria from the mosquitoes Hannibal's army brought from Africa into Italy, and which are still there.

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WE ARE always interested, aren't you, in how writers of "weird" tales get their ideas. So far as we can make out, a good idea doesn't necessarily need a particular environment, mood . . . or even diet! Apparently, we gather, you can be lying on your back in a hammock, sitting in a subway or paddling a canoe, and then all of a sudden, wham, you come up with the hint of a provocative story idea.

Writers, like vampires and werewolves, vary. (We mean no offense to the vampires and werewolves!) But in general it seems to be rather rare when the entire story presents itself completely at first thought. Usually a little corner of a plot will edge first into the foreground of the writer's mind. Perhaps there is some external suggestion that starts the ball rolling; perhaps not. But after a while the writer consciously and unconsciously pokes and prods and shapes his idea and his characters until finally the complete story emerges. Whether or not the finished product is worthy of a place in, well, let's say WEIRD TALES, depends probably as much on the writer's ability to develop and put across his idea, as on the idea itself.

We think that the writing of a good weird yarn calls for greater imagination and originality of plot than almost any other type of writing. And yet with all these high standards the strange part is that there are so many good stories. With many magazines in other fields actually short of top-notch material these days, we've got more good weird stuff than we can shake a broomstick at . . . and we think you'll see what we mean in forthcoming issues of WEIRD TALES.

READERS' VOTE

IRON MASK	MAN IN A HURRY
THE DAY THE WORLD STOOD STILL	UNPUBLISHED STORY
	THE DEAR DEPARTED
THE LETTERS OF COLD FIRE	THE LAKE
	THE GOTHIC WINDOW

Here's a list of eight stories in this issue. Won't you let us know which three you consider the best? Just place the numbers: 1, 2, and 3 respectively against your three favorite tales—then clip it out and mail it to us.

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WEIRD TALES CLUB

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WRITE TO MARTIN WARE, SECRETARY

- This is your club — a medium to help you get together with other fantasy and science-fiction fans. Readers wanted it — they wrote in telling us how much they would enjoy meeting others of similar tastes.
- Membership is very simple: just drop us a line, so that we can enroll you on the club roster, and publish your name and address in the magazine.
- A membership card carrying the above design — personal token of your fellowship with the weird and the fantastic — will be sent on request. (A stamped, addressed envelope should be enclosed.)

Better Than Ever

An analytically-minded reader writes us:

Today W. T. is better than ever, since the first years I knew it!

Yes, the stories are almost all "in the groove," the art consistently excellent, the best since the incomparable Hugh Rankin filled the pages with fearsome loveliness and lovely fearsomeness. (Time out for shudder; remember *The Pacer?* And Rankin's *Conan the Barbarian?*) Back to the present: the poetry is of good quality and well presented. Long poems add to the quality of the mag. W. T. was never a *pulp*. There is no fill-in of inferior stuff, no variation from its traditional mood: weird. Weird, as the mag has defined the word to me through the years, means beauty and strangeness mixed with any other of life's ingredients. Congratulations.

Incidentally, I think the Lovecraft novelette *(Shadow Over Innsmouth,* Jan., 1942), the one about the sea-beings, is the best since *The Outsider*. L's greatness lies in the fact that his tales are not just yarns to be read and thrown away—they are fascinating stories enriched not only with suspense, horror, authenticity (where possible and desirable), good writing, but also with a psychological double meaning, and an admirable feeling, pity, and understanding of life's unfortunates.

All Lovecraft climaxes are psychological. The

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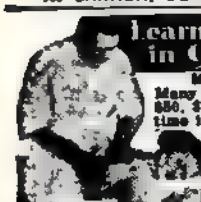

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Innsmouth story was an epic of the degeneration of the human soul, comparable to the life of any person who gives way to a temptation at first abhorrent to him, be it alcohol, black magic, or just laziness—and finds in surrender a curious ecstasy. An old English poet said:

> Vice is a creature of such fearful mien,
> That to be pitied, needs but to be seen.
> But seen too oft, familiar with her face,
> We first endure, then pity, then embrace.

Thus it was with the character in the Innsmouth story.

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We're sorry that lack of space prevents the inclusion of the names of all New Members. The rest will appear next time.

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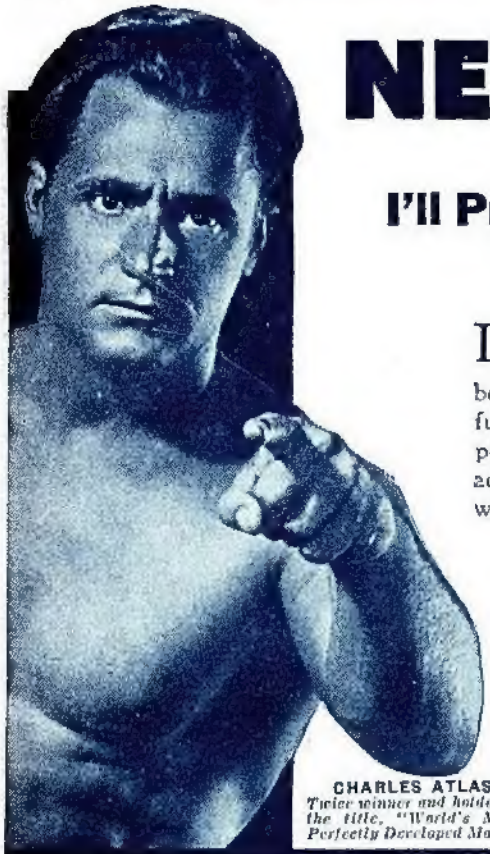

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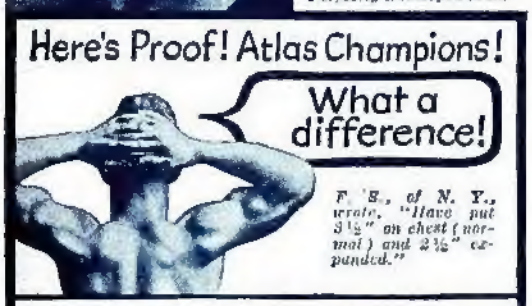
I'll prove I can do the same for YOU! If you're frail and skinny, I'll add weight and muscle to the spots that need flesh and strength. If you're fat and flabby, I'll streamline you into a picture of well-developed, radiant manhood. I'll put smashing power into your back, make your arms and legs lithe and powerful, give you a fine, deep chest. Before I get through with you, you'll be ALL MAN!



FREE BOOK Gives Full Details

My FREE book, *"Everlasting Health and Strength,"* tells all about *Dynamic Tension*, and shows PROOF of my success in building MEN. It's packed with untouched photos of fellows who developed into Atlas Champions—with powerful muscular development and vigor. Let me prove that what I did for them I can do for YOU. For a body that will win respect and admiration, mail the coupon NOW. Don't delay. Address me personally. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 9-D, 115 East 23rd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 9-D,
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"I want the proof that your system of *"Dynamic Tension"* will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, *"Everlasting Health and Strength."*

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AMAZING FORECASTER

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